**Demythologizing Motherhood: A Comparative Study of the Maternal and Mother-Daughter Relationships in the Works of Contemporary British, North American, and Iranian Women Writers**

Yalda Yousefi

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**Abstract**

This thesis explores the representation of motherhood as ideology, identity, and experience in contemporary women’s writings, offering comparative studies of Persian texts alongside English-language narratives from marginalized backgrounds such as African American, Caribbean, Chinese American, and queer mothering. It investigates theoretical approaches to motherhood and identity such as those of Adrienne Rich and Alice Walker, questions the exclusion of women from other literary theories such as that of Michel Foucault, and engages with contemporary critical views on motherhood and the materials published recently in mothering studies. Chapter one of this thesis examines Margaret Atwood’s deconstruction and narration of cultural and literary versions of maternal identity. In chapter two, I examine the notion of matrilineage in the literary and theoretical texts of Alice Walker and explore in what ways Walker’s womanist notions are applicable to the works of two Iranian writers, Simin Daneshvar and Moniru Ravanipur. Chapter three offers another comparative study of Persian and English texts, exploring the issues of exile and motherland in the works of Jamaica Kincaid and Goli Taraghi. Chapter four examines the representations of adoption and identity construction in the autobiographically based narratives of Jackie Kay and Jeanette Winterson. Chapter five reads Kingston and Tan’s novels, exploring the deconstruction of the Chinese mythologies of maternal spaces and the creation of empowering narratives of Chinese American identities. In this thesis, I attempt to retrieve a rather neglected dimension of women’s participation in re-writing maternity and mother-daughter relationships by expanding approaches beyond white, European, heterosexual social identities. I believe this is where the future of representations of motherhood lies, because in order to avoid participating in exclusive patriarchal narrations of the maternal, mothering studies should develop further and wider examinations of maternal narratives of under-represented communities.

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**List of Abbreviations**

*Autobiography The Autobiography of My Mother*

*BD*  *The Bonesetter’s Daughter*

‘CLP’ ‘A City Like Paradise’

*CP The Color Purple*

*HT The Handmaid’s Tale*

*Mansion A Mansion in the Sky*

*Oranges Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*

*PSJ Possessing the Secret of Joy*

*RDR Red Dust Road*

*River At the Bottom of the Rive*

‘SS’ ‘Satan’s Stones’

*AP The Adoption Papers*

*WBH Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal?*

*WW* *The Woman Warrior*

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**Introduction**

*Madar* (1988), a nationally acclaimed film by the late Iranian director Ali Hatami narrates the story of a mother who leaves the nursing home to spend the last few days of her life at her house with her children. *Madar* is a good example of an Iranian film that owes its appeal and popularity to the balance the director creates, by setting the story in an old neighbourhood of Tehran where houses have still preserved their Iranian architecture and by bringing together the element of nostalgia in the plot and the dialogues. An old mother of five children decides to use her approaching death as an excuse to gather her children for the last time at her home. Hatami creates a maternal character that characterizes the all-inclusive love and sacrifice with which Iranian mothers are personified, and the grand success and popularity of the film was mainly due to the emotions of love and respect it stirs in the audience for the mother. *Madar* tells the story of a mother who tries to re-experience the bond that she had with her children in the past. Her nostalgia for her home and her family reflects the nostalgic feelings of a whole nation that has seen its ties with the past gradually broken. The old houses are to be demolished and replaced with apartments, and family bonds do not seem to be as strong as they used to be due to the more modern style and the faster pace of life. The children who come to the old house share the nostalgic feelings and free themselves, even if only for a few days, from the fast current of the modern life and lose themselves in the mother’s presence. The architecture of the old house, with its tall brick walls, the balcony, the blue pond with goldfish in, and its antique furniture reflects the ancient serene presence of the mother who represents the last link with the glorious past and its values.

Was it all that glorious, though, or has the nostalgic view of the past dulled our collective memory of our mothers’ lives and their endeavours in freeing themselves from the constrictive values that have been the means of their subordination? This is the story of a mother who had to raise her children in the absence of their father who was sent in exile to southern Iran. She accepted the fact that they should live apart and that he could re-marry and have a family in the south. Her last wish is to bring harmony and unity to the household that was broken years ago. The mother-persona was called ‘Iran’ in the original screenplay, but the director changed this name later due to his worries about possible misinterpretations. But I believe the name represents the character perfectly, signifying all that is right and wrong about this narrative of the mother/land. The children are mostly ‘failed’ characters: her first son is an uneducated man who exports animal skin and guts, and is in constant clash with his ‘westernized’ wife; the second son is a mystic character, who, working as a bank officer, has lost his connection with reality and his only way of connection with his wife is through a cassette player; her youngest son is mentally disabled and has been sent to a mental health centre since she was sent away to the senior house; her eldest daughter has failed in multiple marriages and suffers from depression, while her youngest daughter is a married woman, pregnant with her second child. Hatami reflects the unifying nature of the mother’s presence in the last scene, where all of her children, despite their previous clashes and fights, gather around the mother’s bed when she passes away. Nonetheless, the film does not seem to suggest any improvements in the children’s lives or any perspectives on their future.

I have seen the film many times since I was a teenager and I have shared the emotions it stirs: I feel joy when the mother comes back to her house for the first time and her youngest son kisses the rims of her chador; I get sad when the siblings fight; I tear up and fill with respect for the mother when she arranges everything for her funeral. It is a beautiful film; it washes my moments with all the turquoise and paisleys and leaves me fresh with the love of my mother, the love for my culture. But I can’t help but ask ‘What is wrong with this film?’, and I know the answer: the story is about a mother, but it lacks the mother’s story. It is about the nostalgic emotions, about children’s relationship with their mother, but it fails to see that not everything about the past was perfect, not every tradition needs to be revered and restored. The mother of the movie does not talk about the hardships she went through in a patriarchal society, where she sacrificed all her life for rearing the children. The old house, its antiquity, and its tall confining walls all signify the patriarchal notion of mother’s status and space in society. As Farzaneh Milani observes in *Words, Not Swords* (2011),

For centuries, masculinity and femininity were designed and defined in relation to space in Iran. Mobility was a desired trait in men; in fact, it was a prerequisite of virility and manliness. Men were engaged in activities outside the house in the public sphere of politics and the marketplace. They were the legitimate wanderers. It was as if the public square belonged to men and men belonged to the public square: *mard-e meydan* [man of the (battle) field]. Femininity, in contrast, was guaranteed and defined by enclosure. It revolved around domesticity: *zan-e khaneh* [woman of the house]. The ideal woman was expected to remain in her ‘proper place.’ For her, mobility was denigrated, rejected, warned against.[[1]](#footnote-1)

This unfair distribution of space has caused an unjust distribution of rights and privileges in society leading to women’s suppression and their inhibition from self-expression, which appears symbolically in the film. As Milani observes, such boundaries are not limited to Iranian culture and women in other cultures experience them too, but in different ways and degrees, and while some clearly announce their desire for women’s submission, others are more subtle: ‘the very emblem of femininity, the Mirror of Venus (♀), identifies women with beauty and stillness, whereas its counterpart, the Weapon of Mars (♂), is an arrow soaring toward the sky. The female symbol is tied to the ground […], whereas the male icon is in motion’.[[2]](#footnote-2) Such restrictions placed on women excluded many of them from pursuing any other activities than giving birth to and raising children and hampered their potential for arts, politics, or science. They need to stay at home, the only space they can call their own.

I believe Hatami’s film missed narrating a big part of the mother’s life, because, had he shown the full picture, nostalgia for the past and its backward notions of motherhood and the maternal would not be the main response to the film. I am not saying that to love one’s child is backward or negative; however, picturing the mother as a selfless angelic character who cannot and does not want anything for herself and whose identity is limited to that of her children, is presenting a false image of motherhood, which denies women the right and the space to define themselves and their independent selfhood. As Rakhshan Bani-Etemad, an influential Iranian woman film-maker, observes in an interview with Gönül Dönmez-Colin, the image of women and the way it is translated in Iranian cinema has been limited for a long time:

Before the revolution, women were depicted either as prostitutes or as some kind of a ‘problem’ for man. After the revolution, we fell into another trap; we tried our best to construct a very positive character of women, which created a myth. The film-makers began to mould model characters that the society expected, such as good mothers. […] The problem is that when we watch the woman as a mother, we define and judge her character within that situation.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Hatami’s mother-persona is depicted according to a limiting ideal based on a social construction of motherhood, which does not encapsulate the complexity of women’s experiences as mothers and daughters. Would we get a more realistic and less glorified narration of the maternal had *Madar* been told from the mother-persona’s point of view? Matami’s mother persona offers her children some advice on how to behave after her death: she asks them not to cry at dinner time and let people enjoy their food; she tells them they have a large samovar and enough cups and saucers for all guests, so they should not wander around the neighbourhood and ask for crockeries; she asks them to be respectful towards the guests and honour them, but they should also avoid wastefulness; and she tells them a banquet is only enjoyable when the host is pleasant, so she wants them to revere their mother’s womanhood.[[4]](#footnote-4) The last sentence demonstrates that Hatami’s portrayal of her womanhood is summarised in domestic affairs and nothing more. The legacy she leaves behind is one of antiquity and subordination.

My purpose in this thesis is neither to vilify nor glorify motherhood. Nor do I wish to conclude with a set of definitions for concepts of motherhood or maternal values. As feminists, Diane Elam argues in *Feminism and Deconstruction* (1994), ‘we are all concerned for women, yet we don’t know what they are. And what binds us together is the fact *that we don’t know*. The specificity of feminism is thus its insistence that the politics of undecidability (among multiple determinations) must be understood from a standpoint of indeterminacy, of political *possibilities*’.[[5]](#footnote-5) The narratives examined in this thesis treat the concepts of mother, daughter, maternal body, and identity as contested sites of meaning, deconstructing and de-legitimizing patriarchal interpretations of mother-daughter relationships. The mother-daughter relationship cannot be defined exclusively as one form or another since it is a multiple concept, the definition of which can be refigured and renegotiated in different contexts. In order to know what the possible realities and politics of mothering are and how they affect women’s lives, we need to look at women’s writings and study the narratives of the maternal. This thesis contributes to ongoing feminist projects in general, and theories on mothers, motherhood, and mothering in particular, that have been re-visiting and revising the literary representations of the maternal within the last few decades:

[To] account for and include women’s contributions to male-centred literary histories; to argue for specifically female-centred traditions; to theorize decidedly female and feminine forms of writing; and to foreground the ways that not only gender but also race, class, religion, and sexuality of both authors and protagonists must be considered when assessing the aesthetic and cultural value of texts.[[6]](#footnote-6)

This thesis studies what fictional and autobiographical representations of the maternal and the mother-daughter relationship suggest about women's identities, and how these representations confirm, challenge, or refute the realities of women’s lives. The emphasis here is on the continuous interplay between literary representations and the realities of the relationship between women and their narratives of that relationship, which affect and create each other. Although there have been many previous studies on motherhood and the mother-daughter relationship, mothering studies have partially neglected the narratives of some under-represented and marginalized communities. This is one of the gaps I aim to address in this thesis by including comparative studies of Persian texts alongside narratives from other under-represented backgrounds such as African American, Caribbean, Chinese American, and lesbian. Some of these texts have been individually analysed by feminist or womanist critics. Nonetheless, this study brings these texts together and highlights the role of maternal narratives of marginalized communities in the ongoing worldwide struggle of women to demythologize mothering. The other issue that this thesis addresses is the multi-dimensional aspect of terms such as mothering and maternal figures, which are often interpreted in their biological senses. Nonetheless, adoption becomes the centre stage in some of the chapters of this thesis where not only motherhood and the mother-daughter relationship are explored from an adopted person’s point of view, but also literary maternal figures are constructed and adopted by daughters in their narratives of selfhood.

For centuries, women and their narratives were absent from literary canons, and the maternal was studied and narrated mostly by men. During the last few decades more women have written on the issue and many feminist scholars have devoted their works solely to motherhood studies. In her renowned 1929 essay *A Room of One’s Own,* Virginia Woolf argues that it is useless for women to go to the great male writers in order to find the answer for their independence and freedom from patriarchal values. Woolf urges us to ‘think back through our mothers’ in the search for our lost female heritage.[[7]](#footnote-7) This thesis reflects how women writers and their mother/daughter personas use their own as well as their mothers’ maternal narratives in their quest for self-knowledge and artistic creation. The focus is on challenging oppressive representations of the maternal and mother-daughter relationship inside patriarchal paradigms and offering viable alternatives that provide women with empowering maternal images. The increasing number of literary and critical works produced in the late-twentieth and twenty-first centuries that focus mainly on the question of the mother-daughter relationship made it essential to analyse the nature of the bond which is shared by all women regardless of their geography or ethnicity. Nonetheless, it was also necessary to study these works in the light of their socio-cultural background and find out in what ways they are similar or different. What constitutes patriarchal principles of motherhood? Why and how do such principles break down? How is the maternal represented and understood in contemporary women’s writings? What significance can the mother-daughter relationship have in women’s relationship with each other in patriarchal societies? How can narratives of the maternal give voice to the silenced mother? How have women writers from underrepresented communities contributed to the feminist debates of motherhood? As these questions are addressed and articulated in different chapters of the thesis, it becomes evident in what ways theories of motherhood are challenged and represented in women’s writings and how these literary productions can reflect and influence women’s sociocultural experiences.

Although mothering is a universal theme and the writers included in this study share the concerns that transcend racial, national, and generational differences, this study illuminates the challenges that are faced by the writers and mother/daughter personas from social minorities and marginalized communities and highlights the mother-daughter dialogues mainly outside the mainstream of white, European, heterosexist societies, extending across borders and generations, while attending to the specifics of place and history. This thesis examines maternal texts, which focus on mother and daughter subjects and writers, on women who have written essays, poetry, fiction, and auto/biographies about being mothers or being mothered, and on the production of maternal figures through acts of creative writing. In examining these narratives of mothering and mother-daughter relationships, the thesis treats motherhood as both personal and political, shedding light on how textual constructions of mothering represent and redefine the realities of women’s lives. The fact that this thesis only discusses women writers’ narratives of motherhood might create the impression that the mother-daughter relationship can or should be only relevant if written by women or that men’s representations of motherhood are not valid enough. This thesis does not endorse such assumptions. Nonetheless, since the thesis explores the significance of women’s re-writing patriarchal myths of the maternal, it was crucial to choose texts and writers that demonstrate how women writers have engaged in the reconstruction of motherhood in their writings.

In its struggle against patriarchal definitions of woman, early works of feminist scholarship place women at the centre of inquiry in order to address the question of biology and differences between women and men. As Hester Eisenstein observes, the biological differences between men and women, which were considered as the source of women’s oppression, are now judged as the source of their liberation:

The woman-centred perspective located specific virtues in the historical and psychological experience of women. Instead of seeking to minimize the polarization between masculine and feminine, it sought to isolate and define those aspects of female experience that were potential sources of strength and power for women, and, more broadly, of a new blueprint for social change.[[8]](#footnote-8)

Hence, instead of biological differences, it is the social construction of those differences that lead to women’s oppression. This thesis begins with the maternal body, foregrounding how patriarchal conceptions of motherhood have confined women to the domestic domain and have defined them mainly according to their roles as wives and mothers, how such patriarchal constructions are represented in literary traditions, and how women writers have resisted and challenged these male-defined narrations and have created alternative visions and narratives of the maternal. Concisely put, patriarchy is ‘a historical force with a material and psychological base that gives rise to a system in which men in general have more power than women and greater access than women do, to whatever society esteems’.[[9]](#footnote-9) Feminism analyses and challenges the oppression of women under patriarchal systems in order to gain knowledge of and make changes to women’s position in society.

Through the feminist struggle to set mothering free of the male-defined institution, one prominent challenge has been to introduce a definition that is as inclusive as it can be in order to be applicable to all types of mothering. The Oxford English Dictionary defines ‘mothering’ primarily as ‘bring up (a child) with care and affection’, although the second sense is a ‘dated’ one meaning ‘give birth to’. Sara Ruddick is a motherhood scholar whose ground-breaking book *Maternal Thinking* (1989) introduces the idea of mothering as a ‘practice’. Ruddick defines practices as ‘collective human activities distinguished by the aims that identify them and by the consequent demands made on practitioners committed to those aims’,[[10]](#footnote-10) hence according to her, to mother is to be dedicated to nurturing the needs that outline maternal responsibilities: ‘The three demands – for *preservation*, *growth*, and *social acceptance* – constitute maternal work; to be a mother is to be committed to meeting these demands by work of preservative love, nurturance and training’.[[11]](#footnote-11) So according to what Ruddick suggests in her definition of maternal practice, anyone, regardless of gender or family relationship, can mother as long as s/he can commit to the demands of mothering. This view also enables one to analyze mothering independently of the issue of maternal identity, which, according to the patriarchal values, is a biological and essential matter. As Andrea O’Reilly observes in her introduction to *Twenty-first-Century Motherhood: Experience, Identity, Policy, Agency* (2010), under the patriarchal institution of motherhood, ‘the definition of *mother* is limited to heterosexual women who have biological children’, and she continues that ‘the concept of good motherhood is further restricted to a select group of women who are white, heterosexual, middle-class, able-bodied, married, thirty-something, in a nuclear family with usually one to two children, and, ideally, full-time mothers’.[[12]](#footnote-12) Nonetheless, feminist scholars have challenged exclusive definitions of motherhood and expanded maternal identity so that not only does the concept of a ‘good’ mother include individuals from other races, classes, and genders, but it also allows non-biological maternal figures to be part of the definition.

Feminist scholarship has challenged and undermined the patriarchal portrayals and definitions of motherhood, and not only has it brought female voices into the literary domain, but also it has provided the opportunity for the methodology and the subject matter to be interpreted and appreciated by those who experience it. Sara Ruddick observes that it is not easy to speak precisely about mothering, since we are ‘overwhelmed with greeting card sentiment’ and have ‘no realistic language in which to capture the ordinary/extraordinary pleasures and pains of maternal work’.[[13]](#footnote-13) Nonetheless, feminist scholarship of the mid-twentieth century introduced a wide spectrum of works that mainly focused on examining and challenging conceptions of the maternal. As Elaine Tuttle Hansen notes in *Mother Without Child* (1997), feminist thinking on motherhood since the 1960s is presented ‘as a drama in three acts: repudiation, recuperation, and, in the latest and most difficult stage to conceptualize, an emerging critique of recuperation that coexists with ongoing efforts to deploy recuperative strategies’.[[14]](#footnote-14) The first act involves second-wave feminist writings such as Simone de Beauvoir’ *The Second Sex* (1949) and Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique*, (1963) who explored the link between female oppression and the naturalization of women’s role as mothers. The second act, starting in the mid-1970s, is characterised by feminist scholars’ attempts to reinterpret and reclaim motherhood, and includes works as different as Nancy Chodorow’s *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender* (1978), Luce Irigaray’s *This Sex Which Is Not One* (1985), Adrienne Rich’s *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (1984), Sara Ruddick’s *Maternal Thinking: Towards a Politics of Peace* (1989), and Hélène Cixous’ The Hélène Cixous Reader (1994). Having started in mid-1980s, the third act is still ongoing and incomplete and questions and extends earlier thoughts. Hansen observes that although ‘some of these critiques tend to reinforce the notion of a historical shift from early feminist attack to subsequent feminist celebration’, she, like other scholars, believes that the story is more complicated:

Several of these more recent critiques attempt to revive and integrate as well as complicate earlier insights into the oppressive aspects of motherhood. There is also a growing sense of impasse. Feminists have demanded and gained new attention for the previously ignored problems of motherhood, but they have not arrived at consensus about how to redefine the concept or adjust the system. Many (but by no means all) women wish to refuse motherhood on the old terms without abandoning either the heavy responsibilities or the intense pleasures of bearing and raising children. The fear that no one will take care of our children if we don’t makes it difficult to go forward, even as it seems impossible to go willingly back.[[15]](#footnote-15)

Hansen’s pattern of a three-act story is helpful in exploring the development of feminist thinking about motherhood. Nonetheless, we should note that even feminists who are mentioned in the same act have different views on the subject. I believe that Hansen’s main argument is that the early feminist critiques of motherhood are not denounced in the last stage; rather they are reformulated and transformed. As the title of her book suggests, ‘the figure of the mother without child’ challenges the socio-cultural depiction of a mother merely in relation to her child. She observes that in old stories, ‘a mother is known to the law only by her willingness to sacrifice everything, even her relation to the child; in them, the mother without child can only be either a criminal who breaks the law or a victim of circumstances or evil forces’. Nonetheless, she argues that in modern stories, a mother ‘subverts these categories of criminal or victim, bad or good mother, by not fitting comfortably into either or by occupying both at the same time’.[[16]](#footnote-16) Hence, in order to offer a balanced reading of motherhood in contemporary texts, it is essential to neither deify nor denigrate motherhood, rather, to offer a critique that projects a representational image of mothering in such narratives reflecting experiences of women in society.

The earlier feminist scholars such as Simone de Beauvoir (*The Second Sex*, 1949) located women’s oppression in their biological difference, viewed motherhood as a generally negative experience, and believed that the only way for women to be liberated from patriarchy was via rejecting motherhood, failing to observe the differences between women and also the relationship between motherhood and socio-cultural ideologies. The following wave of feminist scholarship further developed analyses of the negative effects of patriarchal constructions of motherhood on women’s lives; however, they refused to succumb to the idea of rejection of motherhood. One of these scholars was Adrienne Rich, whose view of motherhood as ‘experience’ and ‘institution’, in her work published in late 1970s, was a great development in the feminist scholarship. She observes in *Of Woman Born* (1976), ‘We know more about the air we breathe, the seas we travel, than about the nature and meaning of motherhood’.[[17]](#footnote-17) Hence, Rich’s book sets out to explore the definitions of motherhood, using different disciplines such as psychology and anthropology as well as her personal experiences. For Rich, the personal is definitely political, and motherhood is defined by the socio-cultural ideologies of maternity. Rich distinguishes between the two meanings of motherhood, one ‘the *potential relationship* of any woman to her powers of reproduction and to children’ and the other ‘the *institution* – which aims at ensuring that that potential – and all women – shall remain under male control’.[[18]](#footnote-18) Patriarchal values superimpose the institution over the relationship, so the experience of mothering is overshadowed by the patriarchal construction of motherhood, which is turned into an institution that subjugates and silences women. Andrea O’Reilly, who has introduced *motherhood studies* as a distinctive discipline, distinguishes between *motherhood* and *mothering* in her introduction to *Encyclopedia of Motherhood* (2010):

In motherhood studies the term *motherhood* is used to signify the patriarchal institution of motherhood, while *mothering* refers to women’s lived experiences of mothering as they seek to resist the patriarchal institution of motherhood and its oppressive ideology. An empowered practice/theory of mothering, therefore, functions as a counter-narrative of motherhood: it seeks to interrupt the master narrative of motherhood to imagine and implement a view of mothering that is *empowering* to women. Empowered mothering may refer to any practice of mothering that seeks to challenge and change various aspects of patriarchal motherhood that cause mothering to be limiting or oppressive to women.[[19]](#footnote-19)

I use the same distinction between the experience of mothering and the patriarchal construction of motherhood in my thesis, since it enables me to argue that women’s own experience of motherhood and the mother-daughter relationship can be a state of resistance and can empower them in their struggle to deconstruct the patriarchal institution of motherhood, which has been a site of female suppression through history. Rich observes, ‘We do not think of the power stolen from us and the power withheld from us in the name of the institution of motherhood’.[[20]](#footnote-20) Feminist representations of mothering repossess that power for mothers. As Fiona Green observes:

Feminist theorists have established an inherent contradiction in motherhood, while motherhood is strongly associated with access to an internalization of patriarchal power, it is simultaneously a place where women can create their own mothering strategies to challenge various dominant power structure such as capitalism, heterosexuality, homophobia, racism and patriarchy.[[21]](#footnote-21)

As Rich ‘plunges into [her] own life’[[22]](#footnote-22) and introduces a novel narrative of maternity and mothering in feminist scholarship, the writers studied in this thesis give voice to under-represented mothers and daughters and challenge patriarcchal construction of motherhood.

Historically women were mainly excluded from the public discourses of culture, and this was due to their lack of authority or entitlement to express their voice. This lack of ‘subjectivity’ or the ability to say ‘I’ is also the consequence of women’s confinement to ‘nature’.[[23]](#footnote-23) Luce Irigaray explores women’s exclusion from language and culture in her works. Contrary to Freud’s view of the oedipal complex, according to which femininity exists only in relation to masculinity and a woman’s sexuality is controlled by the absence and envy of the penis, Irigaray deconstructs the idea that female sexuality is solely rooted in the desire to procreate and posits women as the centre of the construction of culture and writes that women need to reconstruct their place and reclaim their voice:

We must also find, find anew, invent words, the sentences that speak the most archaic and most contemporary relationship with the body of the mother, with our bodies, the sentences that translate the bond between her body, ours, and that of our daughters. We have to discover a language which does not replace the bodily encounter, as paternal language attempts to do, but which can go along with it, words which do not bar the corporeal, but which speak corporeal.[[24]](#footnote-24)

Irigaray’s main argument here is that daughters can play an essential role in giving voice to the silenced mothers and liberating them from the masculine conceptual institution by recovering the mother’s story; otherwise, they will be silenced themselves. Empowerment of women can be fostered by maternal narratives through which the oppressive and empowering aspects of motherhood and the relationship between the two can be explored. Through offering alternative accounts of female/maternal body/identity, exploring women’s past contributions to culture and language unacknowledged by patriarchal systems, and creating alternative cultural representations of the maternal, these narratives of mothers and daughters can challenge and alter women’s state of estrangement and isolation in society. Feminist writers go beyond merely identifying the oppressive institution of motherhood and the empowering experience of mothering. By criticizing the patriarchal institution, the writers provide the space for exploring other ways of mothering that meet their own desires and expectations and their children’s needs. These alternatives challenge the assumption that mothers should abide by the patriarchal pattern of raising children, and includes mothering outside nuclear families or heterosexual relationships and committing to non-authoritative methods of parenting.

The revaluation of motherhood in feminist scholarship of the 1970s and the 1980s led to the development of the feminist writings on mother-daughter relationship and a wide range of works confronted and discussed it in the context of mothering studies. Not only did Adrienne Rich’s *Of Woman Born* challenge the patriarchal institution of motherhood, but also it argues that it is essential for the daughter to revive a constructive relationship with her mother. This contradicted the Freudian idea of rivalry between mothers and daughters and the necessity of daughters’ libidinal connections to their fathers. Nancy Chodorow also challenged Freudian views on femininity and argued, in *The Reproduction of Mothering* (1978), that one of the limitations of his ‘definitional assumption about what constitutes female sexuality’:

[It] is oriented to men, passive, and vaginal. This definition remains phallocentric […] These assumptions of the primacy of maleness distort the Freudian view of gender and female psychological life, especially by downplaying anything associated with motherhood and refusing to recognize that desires to be a mother can develop other than as a conversion of penis envy and a girl’s desire to be masculine […] Freud’s assumption that women’s function is to have babies becomes subsumed under his view that femininity has to do only with sexual orientation and mode and the wish to be masculine.[[25]](#footnote-25)

According to patriarchal gendered standards such as Freud’s, the daughter’s affection is expected from an early age to shift towards her father in order to get prepared for marriage. Rich argues that this affection needs to be redirected to the mother not only for the sake of the mother-daughter relationship, but also for the sake of women’s community and strength among women. Rich believes that the key in rediscovering the bond was to represent strong images of mother-daughter relationships. Discussing the early feminist works of the twentieth century, Rich observes that merely understanding the mothers was not enough: ‘more than ever, in the effort to touch our own strength as women, we needed them. The cry of that female child in us need not be shameful or regressive; it is the germ of our desire to create a world in which strong mothers and strong daughters will be a matter of course’.[[26]](#footnote-26) Rich believes that in the institution of motherhood, women are taboo to women, even as ‘comrades’, ‘cocreators’, or ‘coinspiritors’. Hence, in breaking this taboo, ‘we are reuniting with our mothers; in reuniting with our mothers, we are breaking this taboo’.[[27]](#footnote-27)

Rich’s ideas of mothering and the significance of constructive mother-daughter relationships was shared by African American scholars and black feminists; however, to them, it is black women’s life and experiences in their communities that shape the basis of their views of the maternal. In *Black* *Feminist Thought* (2009), Patricia Hill Collins observes:

[Black women] fashioned an independent standpoint about the meaning of Black womanhood. These self definitions enabled Black women to use African-derived conceptions of self and community to resist negative evaluations of Black womanhood advanced by dominant groups. In all, Black women’s grounding in traditional African-American culture fostered the development of a distinctive African American women’s culture.[[28]](#footnote-28)

The image of the mother is claimed to be one of the most predominant images of women in African American literature, which, as Andrea Benton Rushing observes, can be traced back through the literary history of ancient African cultures where ‘the African woman is associated with core values’ and is revered as the ‘guardian of traditions, the strong Earth-Mother who stands for security and stability’.[[29]](#footnote-29) These values have been passed on from mothers to daughters through generations via oral stories and printed African American literature, hence women perceive themselves in the way they are represented in these narratives. It is argued that black women are independent, self-confident, strong, and assertive, and the loving and supportive nature of black women’s relationship with each other helps daughters prosper and maintain a strong bond with their mothers.[[30]](#footnote-30) Mothering is not reserved just for biological mothers and mothering/othermothering expresses itself as nurturance, so childcare is more of a collective responsibility. As Collins writes, although biological mothers are the main care givers, ‘”othermothers,” women who assist bloodmothers by sharing mothering responsibilities, traditionally have been central to the institution of Black motherhood’.[[31]](#footnote-31) Not only does othermothering facilitate and enrich black women’s lives by providing them with physical and psychological health, it also acts as a source of empowerment for them, delivering the self-knowledge and sense of community they need to construct their maternal identity. What is significant about the works of Collins and other black motherhood scholars is that by shifting the focus of their investigation from European mothers to mothers of other histories, they acknowledge and shed light on the diversity of motherhood as a personal and political issue.

The womanist African American writer Alice Walker focuses on mother-daughter relationships in her *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens* (1983). Womanism is Walker’s approach to the construction of culture/race-specific practices of women-centred activism and ideology for women of colour. In her womanist writings, Walker examines the concept of matrilineage, exploring the ways in which mothers and mother figures have acted as an extension of patriarchal values and have contributed to women’s subordination. Female genital mutilation is the focal point of her novel *Possessing the Secret of Joy* (1992), in which she depicts mothers’ roles in passing on oppressive patterns to their daughters. Nonetheless, Walker believes in order to eradicate such misogynistic exercises, there is the need for an enriching ‘genealogy’ to be created between mothers and daughters and the creativity that mothers pass on to their daughters through their daily activities (gardening in Walker’s mother’s case) provides them with an empowering matrilineage. Wondering how black women’s creativity was kept alive during centuries of pain and suffering, Walker finds the answer in her mother, who passed on the art and the respect for the creative spirit to her daughter: ‘It was my mother – and all our mothers who were not famous – that I went in search of, the secret of what has fed that muzzled and often mutilated, but vibrant, creative spirit that the Black woman has inherited, and that pops out in the wild and unlikely places to this day’.[[32]](#footnote-32) As Mary Helen Washington argues, Walker’s womanist narrative is a conscious attempt to ‘piece together the story of a viable female culture, one in which there is generational continuity, in which one’s mother serves as the female precursor who passes on the authority of authorship to her daughter and provides a model for the black woman’s literary presence in this society’.[[33]](#footnote-33) Walker celebrates the maternal presence in her other works too, where she portrays strong and independent maternal figures and focuses on their relationship with women’s community in general and their daughters in particular. Walker’s poem ‘Women’ summarizes and celebrates the nurturing nature of this maternal bond, where maternal figures pass on the fighting spirit and the creativity to their daughters and provide them with the means of survival: ‘To discover books / Desks / A place for us / How they knew what we / *Must* know / Without knowing a page / Of it / Themselves’.[[34]](#footnote-34)

The ideas of maternal ‘genealogy’ and ‘thinking back through mothers’ have been developed by feminist scholars of different socio-cultural backgrounds; however, some critics have rebutted the concept of a mother-daughter continuum as misleading because, as Virginia Blain argues, ‘it offers a false parallel to the “father-son” genealogy of male writing’, and while ‘sons can inherit directly from their fathers (even if they choose to repudiate the legacy), daughters can have no such unmediated link with their mothers under patriarchy’.[[35]](#footnote-35) Having observed that a ‘separate or unbroken female tradition’ does not exist, Blain writes that a ‘genealogy which is conceived of as being traced back through aunts’ is a more realistic pattern of inheritance since it reflects ‘the realities of our experiences of a broken tradition’.[[36]](#footnote-36) I believe that if we do not define the word ‘mothering’ as merely the biological act of giving birth and rearing one’s own child and expand it to what Ruddick referred to as meeting the three demands of ‘preservation, growth, and social acceptance’, aunts who have met and committed to those demands are included in the idea of maternal genealogy, as Woolf acknowledges in her essay: ‘Indeed my aunt’s legacy unveiled the sky to me, and substituted for the large and imposing figure of a gentleman, which Milton recommended for my perpetual adoration, a view of the open sky’.[[37]](#footnote-37) In the texts examined in this thesis, the legacy is handed over not just by biological mothers, but by adoptive and surrogate mothers, grandmothers, sisters, companions, lovers, literary figures, and maternal texts.

Historically, adoption has been part of parenthood and was affected and effected by economic, cultural, medical, or even political factors. Adoption has always been part of family construction, mostly in the form of people taking the children of relatives into their homes to take care of them temporarily or permanently. As Keating states in *A Child for Keeps* (2008), Britain saw dramatic changes in the discourse and practice of child adoption in 1918-1945, and, although child adoption was still ‘an informal process set outside the law and looked at askance’ by the end of the First World War, after 1945 it became ‘an established way of setting up a family’.[[38]](#footnote-38) The stigma surrounding illegitimacy was one of the main reasons for adoption, and many unmarried mothers were forced by their families, social workers, or nuns to give their children up for adoption. Although the development of social welfare in the late twentieth century enabled mothers to keep their children, some elements of society continued to condemn unmarried motherhood. These social changes are reflected in narratives of adoption, which contribute to mothering studies significantly. These narratives include women who give birth and have their child taken from them, women who are not able to give birth or have children of their own and agree to mother another woman’s child, and women who are separated from their birth mothers and are adopted into another family. One of the key elements in these narratives is the question of identity for the child, and the search for birth parents is an important part of this question. Chapter four focuses on such narratives of adoption and explores constructions of racial and sexual identities at the borders where birth and adoptive backgrounds meet. Nonetheless, adoption is a recurring notion in other chapters as well, where women adopt empowering maternal figures, derived from their cultural heritages, in their journeys of self-actualization.

There is an enormous wealth of fictional and autobiographical texts, which centres on the mother-daughter relationship and explores manifold modes of mothering. The texts I have selected to include in this thesis reflect the huge diversity of such narratives. With their emphasis on multiplicity of identities these texts explore beyond the conventional definitions of the maternal and the mother-daughter relationships. In chapter one, I examine Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*, focusing on ways in which literary representations of women use tropes of motherhood that reinforce patriarchal values. I explore Atwood’s narration of maternal identity, her approach in subverting the cultural/literary construction of motherhood, and her creation of a space in which the silenced female voice is heard. Atwood’s narrative challenges Biblical narrations and other patriarchal myths of the maternal and offers Offred’s tale as an alternative that deconstructs the patriarchal discourses which are central to socio-historical constructions of gendered identities. Atwood challenges the ways in which patriarchal narratives construct oppressive relations between men and women, where women are defined only in terms of their use for male desire and childbearing. Atwood’s novel bears resemblance to Foucault’s ideas on the notion of power and its relation to the body. Nonetheless, as I argue in more detail in the chapter, Atwood demonstrates a more positive attitude to this relation in her novel. Drawing on Cixous’ ‘*écriture feminine’* and Rich’s idea of ‘Writing as Re-Vision’, I reveal how Atwood explores maternal identity, deconstructs male-defined narrations of motherhood, and creates a space in which the silenced female voice is heard.

Chapter two offers a comparative study of Persian and English texts, examining the literary and theoretical womanist texts of Alice Walker: *The Color Purple* (1982), *Possessing the Secret of Joy* (1992), and her collections of essays, and discussing two Iranian women’s writings – Simin Daneshvar’s 1961 ‘Shahri Chon Behesht’ (‘A City Like Paradise’) and Moniru Ravanipur’s 1991 ‘Sang-haye Sheytan’ (‘Satan’s Stones’) in the light of Walker’s womanist notions. This chapter focuses on the notion of matrilineage and how the legacy maternal figures leave behind could be a double-edged sword. As Jane Spencer observes, female to female inheritance has been ‘problematic in a patriarchal society in which the legacy passed from male to male is understood as natural and of central importance’, and although women have yearned for ‘cultural mothers’, it has been difficult to interpret ‘a daughter’s place’ and ‘a mother’s place’.[[39]](#footnote-39) The patriarchal standards that dictate subordination and self-sacrifice for mothers are passed on to daughters; however, daughters can also inherit the knowledge they need in their struggle for identity from biological, adoptive, or cultural mothers. Womanism puts emphasis on African culture and society as the source of inspiration for African women, and while some of the texts studied in this chapter represent maternal figures who provide their adoptive daughters with the means of empowerment, others are the source of internalizing oppressive definitions of the female and the maternal. This chapter argues that Walker’s womanist narratives reflect women’s survival, redemption, and liberation from an oppressive cycle of violence, helping the narrator and the writer achieve the knowledge of the past and preserve it for personal and communal survival in the future. It also examines womanist notions in relation to Iranian women’s writing to re-evaluate the idea that womanism does not exclude non-female and non-black communities; rather, it offers an inclusive tenet that makes it relevant to other oppressed groups, regardless of race, class, or gender.

Chapter three offers another comparative study, exploring the issues of exile and motherland in the autobiographical narratives of Jamaica Kincaid and Goli Taraghi. Memory plays a significant role in their narration of mother-daughter relationships and their depiction of the motherland. These autobiographical writings, while showing the influence of traumatic experiences of the past on the present, help the writers/narrators come to terms with those experiences. In other words, to reject subjectivity and narrate and reclaim authority and identity becomes the key to survival. In an interview with Leslie Garis, Kincaid explains that she is ‘someone who writes to save her life’. She continues: ‘I can't imagine what I would do if I didn't write. I would be dead or I would be in jail because - what else could I do? I can't really do anything but write. All the things that were available to someone in my position involved being a subject person. And I'm very bad at being a subject person’.[[40]](#footnote-40) This chapter studies the writers’ separation from their mother/land and argues that the state of exile is both physical and emotional. While the writers’ exile is the cause of their trauma, it is also the position that provides them with the means of grasping and comprehending the past and reinventing an autonomous identity that helps them survive and make the future possible.

Chapter four extends the study of mother-daughter relationships to examining the representation of adoption in the autobiographically based narratives of Jackie Kay and Jeanette Winterson and exploring identity construction in the face of racial and sexual bigotries. As I argue in the chapter, family and dominant discourses in society can have significant effects on one’s construction of individuality. Nonetheless, identity is partly self-constructed, and in the case of Kay and Winterson, who were both adopted, their narratives expose adopted daughters’ struggle for establishing selfhood and authority and reveal the significance of their relationship with their birth and adopted mothers in the process of self-actualization. This chapter draws on Stuart Hall’s notion of identity, which, he believes, is constituted ‘within, not outside representation’, meaning that in formation of one’s identity, how one is represented has some bearing on how one might represent oneself. Hall observes:

[Identities] relate to the invention of tradition as much as to tradition itself, which they oblige us to read not as an endless reiteration but as ‘the changing same’ […]: not the so-called return to roots but a coming-to- terms-with our ‘routes’. They raise from the narrativization of the self, but the necessarily fictional nature of this process in no way undermines its discursive, material or political effectivity, even if the belongingness, the ‘suturing into the story’ through which identities arise is, partly, in the imaginary (as well as the symbolic) and therefore, always, partly constructed in fantasy, or at least within a fantasmatic field.[[41]](#footnote-41)

As writers concerned with notions of ‘identity’ and ‘marginality’, Kay and Winterson revisit their memories of the past and create their narratives, through which they revisit their relationship with their birth and adoptive parents. Their search for their birth mothers is not merely a search for roots; rather it is an expedition of mother-daughter relationship in the context of adoption and its role in shaping adopted daughters’ narratives of selfhood.

Having explored the concept of survival and self-definition in autobiographical writings in previous chapters, in chapter five I examine the semi-autobiographical works of two Chinese American writers, Maxine Hong Kingston and Amy Tan, exploring literary inventions of maternal figures through their storytelling. Drawing on Marianne Hirsch’s notion of postmemory in relation to mother-daughter relationships and the transfer of memories and experiences between generations, this chapter studies the ways in which the stories of mothers and the daughters’ representations of maternal figures are essential in the establishment of female authority. Having expanded on Alice Walker’s idea of maternal genealogy, Yi-Lin Yu observes that matrilineal narratives are crucial sites where ‘nonwhite and nonmainstream’ writers inscribe ‘the lifeline and the family line that sustain and safeguard the continuation of marginalized, endangered cultures or subcultures’.[[42]](#footnote-42) In this chapter, I return to the idea of female and maternal representations in patriarchal myths discussed in chapter one and argue that by revisiting the Chinese mythologies of maternal spaces and retelling their mothers’ stories, Tan and Kingston deconstruct the stories of the past and create empowering narratives, through which they give voice to historically silenced Chinese women and reclaim their Chinese American identities. Kingston’s creation of Fa Mu Lan’s character represents the act of revisiting myths and recreating them as a means of resistance for female autonomy. By changing a patriarchal story of male power and shifting the power of that story to women, Kingston provides a strong maternal figure whose strength and independence empowers Chinese and Chinese American women. Tan and Kingston set the majority of their narratives in the past and provide the daughters with the opportunity to narrate and relate to the stories of Chinese immigrant mothers/grandmothers/aunts, who are marginalized in both old China and modern America. These writings reveal the key role of storytelling in re-establishing the dialogue between generations and demonstrate the influence of the stories of mothers on the establishment of daughters’ identity. As this summary of each chapter suggests, the thesis begins with exploring the patriarchal myths of motherhood and oppressive representations of mothers and daughters, and it finishes on the note that through narrating mother-daughter relationships, women writers have rewritten such myths and created empowering maternal images.

**Chapter 1**

**Writing The Maternal Body and Identity in Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale***

The Female Body has many uses. It’s been used as a door-knocker, a bottle-opener, as a clock with a ticking belly, as something to hold up lamp shades, as a nutcracker, just squeeze the brass legs together and out comes your nut. It bears torches, lifts victorious wreaths, grows copper wings and raises aloft a ring of neon stars; whole buildings rest on its marble heads.

Margaret Atwood[[43]](#footnote-43)

I am a blank, here, between parentheses. Between other people.

Margaret Atwood [[44]](#footnote-44)

1. **Introduction**

Margaret Atwood has reflected, and reflected on, the female body and identity in many of her works, and *The Handmaid’s Tale* is an influential novel in this respect. Set in Gilead,[[45]](#footnote-45) a totalitarian theocracy, it portrays the subjugation of women in a society that has gradually stripped them of their rights, confined and categorised them into different social functions, and forbidden them from reading or getting involved in any intellectual pastimes. Offred, the narrator of the novel, tells the story of her life as a Handmaid and portrays women’s circumscribed situation in the community. Her narration, shedding light on issues of the maternal body and identity, reveals the Gileadean society’s notions of women and the contradictions and ambiguities inherent to them. By maternal body I refer to women’s embodied potential for getting pregnant, giving birth, and becoming a mother, with which comes the responsibility for nurturing. Hence, in a society where a woman’s social status is determined by her embodiment of these maternal qualities, her sense of identity is constructed through owning or lacking such potentials. Atwood’s narration examines the patriarchal notion that the female is defined and represented by the maternal traits without which women are stripped of their womanhood. This chapter will examine *The Handmaid’s Tale* from a feminist point of view, drawing on theories of the body and identity by such writers as Hélène Cixous, Michel Foucault, Luce Irigaray, and Adrienne Rich. Focusing on ways in which literary representations of women conventionally use tropes of motherhood that reinforce patriarchal notions, the study will argue that although Atwood’s novel displays a resemblance to Foucault’s ideas on the notion of power and its relation to the body in her narration, she has a more optimistic view on this issue. I will draw on Cixous’ concept of ‘*écriture feminine’* and Rich’sidea of ‘Writing as Re-Vision’ to discuss Atwood’s approach to a 'literal' application of certain textual authority, challenging the socio-cultural constructions of motherhood and deconstructing literary portrayals of confining definitions of maternal identity.

*The Handmaid’s Tale* is the story of a silenced voice, a suppressed body, and a denied identity. The Republic of Gilead is governed by a strict theocracy that rules the state by means of violence and surveillance. The Gileadean government claims to believe women were trapped and exploited in sexist consumerist American society, so it positions itself as the liberator of women, forces them out of jobs, and leaves them with no social roles other than the domestic ones. Offred, once an independent woman who was brought up by a feminist mother, finds herself caught up in a dystopian world, where she is turned into a Handmaid to its Commanders and her value is reduced to reproduction. Margaret Atwood observes that ‘people very much experience themselves through their bodies and through concepts of the body which get applied to their own bodies. Which they pick up from their culture and apply to their own’.[[46]](#footnote-46) Cultures and societies are responsible for moulding individuals’ understanding of the body and their definitions of gender differences, and *The Handmaid’s Tale* represents this idea that the body is both biological and political. The political, to Atwood, is ‘a part of life’, and what she means by political is ‘how people relate to power structures and vice versa’.[[47]](#footnote-47) Atwood’s story of the Handmaids in Gilead reveals the ways in which patriarchal patterns define the female body and womanhood according to the maternal attributes without which women are considered as non-existent, as ‘Unwomen’.

What makes *The Handmaid’s Tale* perceptive are the political upheavals and the socio-cultural issues explored by Atwood in this book. Except for the imaginary place and time of the novel, which is set in the near future, in a [totalitarian](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Totalitarian) Christian [theocracy](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Theocracy), the story offers nothing that has not happened or might not happen again in the ‘real’ world. In her ‘Note to the Reader’, Atwood explains that the material for creating this novel has accumulated in her mind for a lifetime, and that her studies of the American Puritans have made her interested in the histories of totalitarian governments, particularly the rising fanaticism of the Taliban in Afghanistan and the Islamic revolution in Iran in the late 1970s. These are real-world examples of the totalitarian communities in which women’s rights are limited and the patriarchal values that place women in the domestic sphere are enforced. Despite the alleged philosophy of freedom and equality, the United States has a long history of suppression, which makes it a suitable setting for the novel. As Danita J. Dodson argues:

*The Handmaid’s Tale* illuminates the deplorable irony that a nation established upon the utopian principle of ‘liberty and justice for all’ has also been a dystopia for those humans sequestered and tortured because of differences from mainstream culture. As casualties of a patriarchal-based empire within the national borders, Native Americans, African Americans and women are all examples of peoples who have been historically locked away from the utopian American Dream.[[48]](#footnote-48)

Atwood’s narrative also suggests her criticism of returning to the patriarchal values of family and sexuality under America's fundamentalist Christian Right represented by Ronald Reagan in 1987. Shirley C. Neuman describes how the policies of the government and the federal budget cuts targeted the programs that served mainly women, and how sexual assaults and domestic violence increased following these changes: ‘Medicaid ceased to fund legal abortions… several states passed laws restricting... legal abortion… The debate about freedom of choice for women flipped over into court rulings about the rights and freedom of the fetus. The Equal Rights Amendment died’.[[49]](#footnote-49) Atwood has been concerned about the possible outcome of such fundamentalist movements, and since she has seen how women’s rights were neglected in totalitarian regimes such as the Taliban’s, she observes that this could happen again.

In order to grasp Atwood’s depiction of Gilead and the influence of the historical events on her narration, I would like to present a brief explanation of the socio-political changes Iran faced after the 1978 Islamic revolution. Having experienced ‘modernization’ under Reza Shah’s policies in the early twentieth century, which required all men working in government institutions to dress like Europeans, and which banned women’s veiling and incorporated women into the workforce, Iran faced radical changes after the Islamic revolution in 1978, which set dress codes for women and passed laws that conditioned the presence of women in the public sphere, demanding compliance with religious principles and regulations issued by the clerics. As Ali Akbar Mahdi states, ‘after the establishment of the Provisional Government of Mehdi Bazargan, Ayatollah Khomeini demanded the abolition of the Family Protection Act, ordered the implementation of Sharia laws in the country, and issued a decree demanding women dress “properly”’.[[50]](#footnote-50) The government’s logic was that Western culture had subjected women to oppression by making them a plaything for men, and that Islam mandates veilingso that women may take on their social responsibilities in a ‘pure and safe’ environment. An instance of limitation exercised on women was the law that banned them from acting as judges, expressing the belief that women are not adequately equipped and are not capable of making logical decisions as judges. Family laws regarding custody and guardianship of children, and divorces demanded by wives, also changed to women’s disadvantage. According to the government’s stated beliefs, such ‘protective’ laws were intended to remove everything that prevented the ‘effective’ participation and employment of women. These changes proved helpful for women of more conservative and religious backgrounds, in the sense that although they were not previously allowed to participate in the public sphere, they ‘now found the dominant Islamic atmosphere in society less socially intimidating and more religiously acceptable’, and since working outside the home was no more sanctioned for women by religious authorities, their ‘husbands or parents had one less excuse for not allowing their daughters or wives to participate in the public arena’.[[51]](#footnote-51) Nonetheless, as a result of these regulations many secular women, who did not abide by these rules and whose opposition failed, were expelled from their jobs and many chose to retire or migrate.

One could find implied parallels between Atwood’s description of Gileadean society and its patriarchal values and what happens in the fundamentalist governments of the late twentieth century. Nonetheless, her narrative is far from a simple backlash against religious extremism. In *The Handmaid’s Tale,* Atwood depicts the ways in which power controls, and the society she represents in the novel is a manifestation of power politics at its worst. As Atwood’s narrative sets a dystopian theme and represents women with neither rights nor freedom, it bears a close resemblance to Foucault’s theories in *Discipline and Punish* (1977) and *The History of Sexuality* (1978)*,* which examine how modern disciplines and their principles of order and control create an all-encompassing power that acts upon human subjects via being internalised by the very subjects. Foucault’s notion of power and its relation to the body can be applied to aspects of women's oppression under totalitarian governments’ control: it is all about ‘who can own whom, who can do what to whom and get away with it, even as far as death… who can sit and who has to kneel or stand or lie down, legs spread open… who can do what to whom and be forgiven for it’ (*HT* 144-145). Atwood critiques women’s oppression in patriarchal communities to reveal how such subjugation is organised and enforced in an extreme, literal, literary way in her novel.

The Islamic revolution and its ‘political spirituality’ Michel Foucault once praised[[52]](#footnote-52) becomes one of the models according to which Atwood creates her narration of Gilead, in which she explores power relations. Foucault’s writings on Iran represent his enthusiasm and fascination for the revolution and the nation’s rejection of the power in place; however, he failed to grasp the essence of an ‘Islamic government’. He views the clerics as democratic, noting that ‘there is an absence of hierarchy in the clergy’:

By ‘Islamic government,' nobody in Iran means a political regime in which the clergy would have a role of supervision or control. . . . It is something very old and also very far into the future, a notion of coming back to what Islam was at the time of the Prophet, but also of advancing toward a luminous and distant point where it would be possible to renew fidelity rather than maintain obedience.[[53]](#footnote-53)

His romanticised notions of ‘Islamic government’ were proven wrong soon after the revolution and the repressive character of the government became apparent when new laws were passed on women’s legal rights and no opposition was tolerated. Atwood’s vision of the threats a religious patriarchy could impose on society proved more realistic. She portrays the gradual eradication of individual freedom under patriarchal patterns in her novel, believing that narrating these stories has moral authority and value:

I believe that fiction writing is the guardian of the moral and ethical sense of the community. Especially now that organized religion is scattered and in disarray, and politicians have, Lord knows, lost their credibility, fiction is one of the few forms left through which we may examine our society not in its particular but in its typical aspects; through which we can see ourselves and the ways in which we behave towards each other’.[[54]](#footnote-54)

Atwood’s narrative suggests that if too much emphasis is put on the capacity of power and its effect on the body, as Foucault does, it can lead to the reduction of social agents to passive entities, failing to demonstrate the ways in which individuals may counter the power and act in an autonomous fashion. Unlike Foucault, who sidesteps the issue of gender in his discussions of power, Atwood envisions the possibilities for resistance to women’s subordination, presenting a more optimistic view of the relation between power and the body. In the next sections of this chapter, I will examine Atwood’s reflections on the relation between power and body and will discuss the representations of the maternal body’s subjugation and the production and suppression of ‘women’ and ‘unwomen’ through patriarchal control. I will then discuss Atwood’s outlook regarding the notion of ‘*écriture féminine*’ and Rich’s ideas about reclaiming feminine identity and language and re-writing the image of womanhood with respect to Atwood’s choice of narrator and narration. I will argue that we can identify in Atwood’s work a similar approach to Cixous’, enacting through her fiction a theoretical approach that enables her character to escape the hegemonizing tendencies of power. I will also argue that Atwood exceeds Cixous’ theories in introducing writing as the means to revise the patriarchal traditions that have affected maternal subordination. Atwood’s narrative depicts the ways in which Foucault’s idea of the omnipresent power and its colonising effect on women’s lives is relevant to our world, particularly to theocratic governments, but she is more optimistic in her outlook and envisions a brighter future for women by correcting the patriarchal definitions of the maternal and revising the past.

1. **The Tale of the Body**

The female body in Atwood’s novels is the site of disease and abuse, and female characters experience alienation, otherness, and marginality as a result of their socio-cultural location. Atwood participated in the heated feminist debates on the notions of the female body of the time. ‘In the 1970s’, Londa Schiebinger states, ‘feminism reinserted the body into history, bringing to light issues that had previously been considered too vulgar, trivial, or risqué to merit serious scholarly attention’. [[55]](#footnote-55) Most of Atwood’s novels published prior to *The Handmaid’s Tale* deal with female characters with mental and emotional anxieties that are a result of bodily unease. *The Edible Woman* (1969), questioned and examined gender stereotypes, portraying the life of anorexic Marian whose structured consumerist life changes when she finds out that she cannot eat anymore, while Joan, in *Lady Oracle* (1976), is obsessed with eating and consumption. Rennie, the protagonist of *Bodily Harm* (1981)*,* is a breast cancer survivor whose relationships bring nothing but pain and humiliation for her. In *The Handmaid’s Tale*, Offred’s body is controlled by male power due to the social pressures of a child-bearing role. Atwood explores and critiques the hegemonic thought that women’s place is in the home, and that to have children equates to being a ‘real’ woman. In Gilead, women who accept and internalize the patriarchal definition of womanhood and give in to the oppressive power are accepted by society. Those who resist patriarchy or simply do not have the means to function as home-making, child-bearing women, experience expulsion from society in the sense that they are considered as lacking in terms of motherhood, hence they are neither respected, nor accepted by society. In the next two parts of this chapter, entitled ‘The Woman’ and ‘The Unwoman’, I argue that Atwood examines the relation between the body and power, explores the consequences of internalisation and resistance, and depicts the creation of the concepts of ‘woman’ and ‘unwoman’ in patriarchal societies and women’s suppression under such definitions.

* 1. **The Woman**

Michel Foucault’s concept of the body is of one that is subjected, used, and changed in the interests of disciplinary power which practises a continuous and invasive control of individual conduct. Foucault, in *Discipline and Punish*, suggests that the idea of discipline functions as an abstraction of the idea of power from any individual: ‘“Discipline” may be identified neither with an institution nor with an apparatus; it is a type of power, a modality for its exercise, comprising a whole set of instruments, techniques, procedures, levels of application, targets; it is a “physics” or an “anatomy” of power, a technology’.[[56]](#footnote-56) The Republic of Gilead can be considered an example of a world in which the all-encompassing nature of power pervades people's everyday life, affects internalization of power structures within the body, and leads to women’s ‘self-policing’ and self-oppression, aggravating intrinsic power relations that surround social constructions of motherhood. As Foucault observes in *The History of Sexuality*:

Power is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere. And ‘Power,’ insofar as it is permanent, repetitious, inert and self-reproducing, is simply the over-all effect that emerges from all these mobilities, the concatenation that rests on each of them and seeks in turn to arrest their movement.[[57]](#footnote-57)

Foucault believes that power is inherent in human relations that are characterized by inequalities and divisions, which produce power and are produced by power. Furthermore, he believes ‘where there is power, there is resistance’, and that resistance is ‘never in a position of exteriority in relation to power’.[[58]](#footnote-58) Resistance is an essential and unavoidable element in power relations, because ‘if there were no possibility of resistance (of violent resistance, flight, deception, strategies capable of reversing the situation), there would be no power relations at all’.[[59]](#footnote-59) Therefore, possibilities for resistance are always present in the power network; hence, the existence of the disciplinary power in the system. The aim of the disciplinary power is to encourage docility and to optimize productivity to feed into the power through manipulating, exploring, breaking down, and rearranging the features, movements, and behaviour of the human body.[[60]](#footnote-60) Nonetheless, Foucault does not always differentiate between kinds of body, and his discussions on discipline and power represent gender neutrality, implying that gender has no impact. So despite his attempt to elaborate ‘systems of power and resistance’, he ends up ‘writing not so much from a site of resistance but from a site of power – male-centered discourse’. [[61]](#footnote-61) He ignores the fact that our world is far from gender neutral and that women have been extensively identified with the body, which has resulted in female objectification.

Atwood does what Foucault did not, and that is to set gender as the focal point of her narrative of power and resistance. She develops the implications of Foucault’s views on the maternal (rather than the generic) body and represents the lives of women whose bodies are suppressed and whose lifestyle is changed in order to feed into patriarchal concepts of womanhood. Atwood’s narrative seems to link the generic ideas of power and control to the feminist discussions of motherhood in the patriarchal context. Atwood, in her essay ‘Adrienne Rich: *Of Women Born*’, argues that motherhood is a learned process rather than an instinct: it is an ‘institution’, which shapes how women should live their lives and what they should feel and do. She observes that what Rich questions in her book is the unexamined assumptions about mothering:

Rich is writing about pernicious myths. One of the most pernicious, of course, is that mothering is an instinct, that it simply wells up in all ‘real’ women who give birth to children (and according to the same myth, a woman who does not give birth to children is not a ‘real’ woman; she is a cipher). Once a biological mother, you will automatically become a Madonna, a virtuous model of self-sacrifice and devotion. This myth is pernicious because it leaves many women feeling inadequate, baffled or even evil if the promised happiness and fulfilment fail to materialize.[[62]](#footnote-62)

To presume that all women have maternal instincts shapes the social notion of women as the main caregivers in society, which in turn leads to social practices that restrict and suppress women. It is important to note that Atwood’s and Rich’s aim is not to devalue motherhood or the experience of birthing, but to question the myths and expectations that enforce repressive social norms and obliterate the reality of maternal identity.

Atwood's depiction of Gileadean women whose social experience is impoverished and controlled within the patriarchal images of female sexuality reflects this idea that body is a social entity. Handmaids are the fertile women in Gilead whose function is to bear children for the Commanders and their Wives, who are incapable of bearing children themselves. Gilead’s government is an Old Testament-inspired religious orthodoxy that bases and justifies the gender-crime against Handmaids by using the Biblical story of Jacob. When his wife Rachel fails in bearing children for him, she tells Jacob to take her two handmaids to bed to bear him children: ‘And she said, Behold my maid Bilhah, go in unto her; and she shall bear upon my knees, that I may also have children by her’ (Genesis 30:1-3). In *The Handmaid’s Tale*, when Commanders try to impregnate a Handmaid, she lies between the Wife’s legs as if they are one person, so while the Handmaid is the one who bears the child, the Wife becomes the mother and gets to keep the child. This is a very significant ritual for Wives and Handmaids since it gives both what a ‘woman’ needs to fulfil her function: mothering.

The descriptions Offred gives of her room, her clothes, and her daily life routine mirrors Foucault’s illustration of the Panopticon[[63]](#footnote-63) as a ‘way of defining power relations in terms of the everyday life of men’.[[64]](#footnote-64) After separation from her family and becoming a Handmaid, Offred does not consider or call anything ‘mine’ anymore: ‘The door of the room - not my room, I refuse to say *my* - is not locked’ (*HT* 18). Her name, ‘of Fred’, suggests that she belongs to her Commander, Fred. Not only does she not own anything, but she is also state property and a ‘national resource’ that has been tattooed on her ankle (*HT* 75). The veil or the ‘wings’ around her face is an extension of patriarchal oppression that limits her view and prevents her from gaining the knowledge by which she could get empowered. Commanders are in control of knowledge and this gives them the power to control who can see what. While she can be seen by others, she cannot see anything but what lies in front of her. The similarity between Offred’s room and a cell, and that of her situation in Gilead to a panoptic prison’s inmate, signifies the omnipresent nature of power and its effect on individuals’ lives: ‘A chair, a table, a lamp... There must have been a chandelier, once. They’ve removed anything you could tie a rope to... On the wall above the chair, a picture, framed but with no glass’ (*HT* 17). Foucault argues that ‘the systems of punishment are to be situated in a certain “political economy” of the body: even if they do not make use of violent or bloody punishment, even when they use “lenient” methods involving confinement or correction, it is always the body that is at issue’.[[65]](#footnote-65) When Offred is at the ‘Rachel and Leah’[[66]](#footnote-66) re-education centre with other future handmaids, they are kept confined as in a prison: ‘The lights were turned down but not out. Aunt Sara and Aunt Elizabeth patrolled: they had electric cattle prods slung on thongs from their leather belts [...] we weren’t allowed out, except for our walks, twice daily, two by two around the football field which was enclosed now by a chain-link fence topped with barbed wire’ (*HT* 13-14).

There are different groups who exercise power in Gilead, and they each have a certain amount of access to this source of control. The ruling class consists of Commanders who, represented by the colour black to signify their superiority, are the decision-makers in Gilead and are entitled to a Wife, a Handmaid (if necessary), Guardians who do the ‘routine policing’, and Marthas,[[67]](#footnote-67) who are the female servants. The government creates a sense of fear and distrust in individuals, women in particular, in favour of their own patriarchal values and practices. The act of monitoring is done by the Eyes who are present everywhere, but women monitor each other and themselves, as well: as Foucault sets forth in the concept of self-policing, the ‘gaze is alert everywhere’.[[68]](#footnote-68) Even the actual exercise of power is sometimes unnecessary, since it has become internalized by women. This internalization is vivid when Offred perceives some tourists walking the streets of Gilead, wearing shockingly short knee-length skirts: ‘We are fascinated, but also repelled. They seem undressed. It has taken so little time to change our minds, about things like this’ (*HT* 38). The power hierarchy of Gilead represents the ways in which institutions operate on individual freedom and lead people to the state of self-surveillance and internalization of the very standards that confine them.

Atwood depicts the iron grip of such hierarchical disciplines on one’s body and mind in Offred’s description of ‘the heart of Gilead’ – ‘where the war cannot intrude’ – as a place where ‘nothing moves’ and which ‘knows no bounds’, since it is ‘within’ its people, and they cannot escape its grip on their lives and souls (*HT* 33). As Foucault sets forth, society ‘lays down for each individual his place, his body... by means of an omnipresent and omniscient power that subdivides itself in a regular, uninterrupted way even to the ultimate determination of the individual, of what characterizes him, of what belongs to him, of what happens to him’.[[69]](#footnote-69) Discipline is designed to condition individuals to become self-policing, to define themselves within prescribed identities, and to live their lives as if under constant supervision even in private. Self-surveillance leads women to abide by male-centred social expectations and maintains female subjugation. Hence, Handmaids’ subjugation under patriarchal power reflects Foucault’s definitions of subjection: ‘subject to someone else by control and dependence, and tied to his own identity by a conscience or self-knowledge’.[[70]](#footnote-70) Women are controlled by the patriarchal system, and their own internalization of gendered identity extends and empowers patriarchy. The principle used in Gilead is that ‘the best and the most cost effective way to control women for reproductive and other purposes was through women themselves’ (*HT* 320). Aunts, who have internalized the patriarchal values and have become agents of the masculine discourse, embrace the little authority and freedom bestowed on them and use the ‘respectful’ space they are granted to drive Handmaids further to the periphery in order to bring themselves closer to the centre.

To make Handmaids wear veils, to cover women’s bodies with long, loose-fitting gowns, and to dress them in specific colours are the means by which patriarchy exerts power and controls. Women are expected to make themselves invisible by covering up in order to protect themselves from the male gaze and desire. Even if a woman is raped, she is held responsible for it, and she is the one at fault, since she failed in being meek and subservient. When Janine, a Handmaid, tells at Testifying about how she was gang-raped, she is condemned as the one responsible:

But *whose* fault was it? Aunt Helena says, holding up one plump finger.

*Her* fault, *her* fault, *her* fault, we chant in unison.

*Who* led them on? Aunt Helena beams, pleased with us.

*She* did. *She* did. *She* did.

Why did God allow such a terrible thing to happen?

Teach her a *lesson*. Teach her a *lesson*. Teach her a *lesson*. (*HT* 82)

The theocratic ideals serve the interests of the class in command, and not only are women, who do not belong to the patriarchal centre, at the mercy of sexist behaviour, they are also considered responsible for what happens to them due to these gender crimes.

A Handmaid is represented by the colour red, in which she is supposed to dress: ‘Everything except the wings around my face is red: the colour of blood, which defines us’ (*HT* 18). The blood imagery here signifies the importance of menstruation in a Handmaid’s life, since every bleeding is the sign of another failure to conceive and fulfil Commanders’ wish. The colour red signifies her social status and function and defines where she can go and what she can do or say .The colour red is historically associated with the power of the wearer, because until the invention of chemical dyes, it could be obtained from ‘exotic substances and secret techniques’ that only a few dyers knew about. Therefore, red cloth, ‘elusive, expensive, and invested with powerful symbolism’, was only ‘the prized possession of the wealthy and well-born’.[[71]](#footnote-71) Nonetheless, in Atwood’s novel, the colour red is associated with Handmaids’ powerlessness, which once again demonstrates Atwood’s use of Biblical symbology. Red symbolises passion, courage, and desire throughout much of the world, but it can also signify sin,[[72]](#footnote-72) and while men in red traditionally displays their passion and bravery, women wearing red is historically affiliated with dishonour. Red is one of the most symbolic and meaningful colours in the Bible: “‘Come now, and let us reason together,’ says the Lord, ‘though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall be as wool.’”[[73]](#footnote-73) In this passage, red signifies the sin and white signifies forgiveness, referring to God’s ability to purify sins. Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), in which Hester Prynne is required to wear a scarlet ‘A’ on her dress to shame her for adultery, is a good example of literary reference to the colour red. Handmaids in Gilead are chosen from women who were in relationships without marriage in the pre-Gileadean era, so they are considered as ‘fallen’ women, symbolised by their red attires. In her poem ‘A Red Shirt’ (1987), Atwood draws on the Biblical association of the colour white with purity and the colour red with sinful passion, suggesting women who choose the latter will be stigmatized and ostracized under patriarchal patterns:

[…] A girl should be

a veil, a white shadow, bloodless

as a moon on water; not

dangerous; she should

keep silent and avoid

red shoes, red stockings, red dancing.

Dancing in red shoes will kill you.[[74]](#footnote-74)

Atwood juxtaposes two sets of realities through contrasting images: ‘white’ and ‘red’; ‘silent’ and ‘dangerous’. As ‘a moon on water’ is only an illusion, the patriarchal ‘truth’ of womanhood is unreal and fabricated. Although ‘dancing in red shoes’ is believed to cause a girl’s doom according to the male-defined values, Atwood’s choice of word ‘bloodless’ suggests the opposite and connotes that compliance with the very values brings about the death of women’s authority.

Atwood’s frequent use of blood imagery in Offred’s narration suggests its significance in a woman’s life and depicts its crucial role in defining a woman’s world in patriarchy as the menstrual blood equals the state of non-motherhood. A Handmaid should keep a record of her menstruation, so her life becomes a repetition of 28-day cycles that could determine her destiny:

I sink down into my body as into a swamp, fenland, where only I know the footing. Treacherous ground, my own territory. I become the earth I set my ear against, for rumours of the future. Each twinge, each murmur of slight pain, ripples of sloughed-off matter, swellings and diminishing of tissue, the drooling of the flesh, these are signs, these are the things I need to know about. Each month I watch for blood, fearfully, for when it comes it means failure. I have failed once again to fulfil the expectations of others, which have become my own. (*HT* 83)

Offred has internalized Aunt Lydia’s teaching that Gilead is ‘within’ her, so the body that used to belong to Offred, is an invaded ‘treacherous’ territory now, because ‘the expectations of others’ have become her own. Gillian Rose observes that historically, ‘landscapes are often seen in terms of the female body’.[[75]](#footnote-75) The ‘earth’ here refers to the patriarchal view according to which ‘women represent the enticing and inviting land to be explored, mapped, penetrated and known’.[[76]](#footnote-76) This passage reflects the patriarchal control over both time and space, where the female rhythm is naturalized to lunar cycles. Offred is well aware of the fact that her ultimate value in Gilead depends on bringing forth offspring, and although her menstrual blood means that she is a woman and still fertile, it symbolizes her failure in fulfilling the purposeof her existence within Gilead.

In Gilead, to give birth and/or to mother means to be recognised as a woman, and a Handmaid’s labour defines both Wives and Handmaids in this sense by offering them both the chance to mother. Throughout the patriarchal system, Adrienne Rich observes, two ideas of the female body that are deeply internalized in women flow side by side:

[O]ne, that the female body is impure, corrupt, the site of discharges, bleedings, dangerous to masculinity, a source of moral and physical contamination, ‘the devil’s gateway.’ On the other hand, as mother the woman is beneficent, sacred, pure, asexual, nourishing; and the physical potential for motherhood – that same body with its bleedings and mysteries – is her single destiny and justification in life.[[77]](#footnote-77)

Handmaids are considered dangerous and contaminative to Gileadean patriarchy (although the survival of the community depends on their bodies); they should be covered and tamed for the good of society, and the only way they can escape the grim destiny of the ‘unwomen’ who are cast away and left to die is to give birth and transform that corrupt flesh and lascivious body into a worthy ‘vessel’ in which the blessed ‘fruit’ can grow (*HT* 75). Atwood here, referring to the ‘Fall’ of Adam and Eve after eating the forbidden fruit (Genesis 3), explores and challenges the Biblical concept of labour as the means of redemption. While Eve’s suffering in labour is the main effect of her ‘Fall’, the Virgin Mary is redeemed from the ‘Fall’ through carrying ‘the blessed fruit’ and giving birth to Jesus Christ who brings redemption to all humanity.

The patriarchal Gilead projects the dichotomy of the sinful and the redeemed or impure-handmaid and angel-wife for the benefits of male dominance, but neither the pure wife nor the contaminating handmaid gains any autonomous identity. Gilead enforces a certain image of ‘woman’ that is defined only in terms of the maternal qualities, and to which a Wife and a Handmaid try to fit in order to escape exile. The scene of Ceremony (the impregnation act), where they become one by the Handmaid lying between the Wife’s legs and the Wife holding her hands, reveals the significance of the relationship between these two women, whose womanhood is only acknowledged if they jointly and separately succeed in conceiving and delivering a child. Those who fail to fit Gileadean definitions and functions of womanhood are expelled from society.

* 1. **The Unwoman**

The production of a concept of ‘woman’ in terms of maternal features by definition constructs the concept of ‘unwoman’, which is lacking in everything that defines the former. In ‘Sorties’, an essay published in 1975, Cixous argues that thought works through opposition, and she describes a set of hierarchical oppositions which, she asserts, has structured western thought, and governed its political practice:

Theory of culture, theory of society, symbolic systems in general – art, religion, family, language – it is all developed while bringing the same schemes to light. And the movement whereby each opposition is set up to make sense is the movement through which the couple is destroyed. A universal battlefield. Each time, a war is let loose. Death is always at work.[[78]](#footnote-78)

Cixous explores these systems of oppositions in the literary and philosophical texts that have produced such binary oppositions and have led to a violent, deadly conflict in which both parties are doomed. A similar dualist structure of unequal power is represented by women’s suppression under the rules Commanders set for Gilead, and this patriarchal hierarchy leads to the production of the term ‘unwoman’ to exclude and exile women who do not fit their definition of the female.

This hierarchical structure and its construction of subjectivity is also represented in Atwood’s *Oryx and Crake* (2003), where Jimmy, the protagonist and narrator of the novel, has internalised the binary definition of gender through his father’s teachings in his childhood: ‘Women always get hot under the collar… women, and what went on under their collars. Hotness and coldness, coming and going in the strange musky flowery, variable country inside their clothes- mysterious, important, uncontrollable’. [[79]](#footnote-79) Having learned to view woman as whimsical and men as reasonable, Jimmy becomes a manipulative male who sees women only as bodies to be exploited. On the other hand, Oryx, Jimmy’s lover, is the symbol of the suppressed, exploited female who has been sold by her mother as a child porn star and has been handled as a sexual commodity. Oryx has to abide by the exploitative treatment she faces in patriarchal society in order to avoid life in the dangerous, insecure Pleeblands and to afford living at the protected and guarded corporate compound.

A similar theme is explored in *The Handmaid’s Tale*, where Offred has no other choice than taking on the life of a Handmaid if she does not want to be denounced an Unwoman and exiled in the Colonies. In a society which defines women solely by their child-bearing potentialities, an ‘infertile’ woman who has no other use for the community is stripped of her ‘womanhood’, and is exiled from the society in the sense that she is an entity with no value and does not exist as a woman. Offred expresses her frustration over the fact that her body encapsulates her identity, saying, ‘I don’t want to look at something that determines me so completely’ (*HT* 73). She is treated like a ‘two-legged womb’ (*HT* 136), which exaggerates Rich’s belief that under patriarchy the maternal is domesticated and that in ‘transfiguring and enslaving woman, the womb, – the ultimate source of the power’ is turned against women and ‘itself made into a source of powerlessness’.[[80]](#footnote-80) Handmaids’ status as child-bearers is made into their lives’ major factor, and labels like ‘barren’ and ‘unwoman’ are used to negate any further identity. Commanders are not considered to be the reason for Handmaids’ failure to get pregnant, because the idea of male sterility does not exist in Gilead. The term ‘unman’ does not exist in this society.

Handmaids are not the only women who are denounced ‘Unwomen’ should they fail in fulfilling the patriarchal expectations of the maternal. Aunts are usually older, unmarried women who have no hope for marriage or giving birth and are responsible for controlling, monitoring, and ‘re-educating’ Handmaids. The power bestowed upon Aunts is only to serve Gilead’s principles. Many women are willing to serve as Aunts, ‘either because of genuine belief’ in Gileadean values, or for ‘the benefits they might thereby acquire’ such as escaping the title ‘Unwoman’ and exile to the colonies: ‘When power is scarce, a little of it is tempting’ (*HT* 320). Once a week, Aunts showed cautionary movies to persuade women to do ‘something useful’ and join the ‘sacred’ mission of the Handmaids: ‘Sometimes the movies she showed would be an old porno film [...] Consider the alternatives, said Aunt Lydia. You see what things used to be like?... Sometimes, though, the movies would be what Aunt Lydia called an Unwoman documentary’ (*HT* 128). Aunts are also responsible for directing different rituals, including ‘Salvaging’ (large-scale execution): ‘Aunt Lydia placed her hand over the mike [...] I’ve leaned forward to touch the rope in front of me, in time with the others, both hands on it [...] then placed my hand on my heart to show my unity with the Salvagers and my consent, and my complicity in the death of this woman’ (*HT* 288).

Handmaids’ attendance and compliance with the ceremony represents the internalization of the patriarchal violence that is released through the ritual. Although Offred has attended the ceremony unwillingly and only to ensure her own survival, she acknowledges her responsibility for participating in the system’s brutality: ‘It’s true, there is a bloodlust; I want to tear, gauge, rend’ (*HT* 291). Such systems of punishment, Foucault suggests, have claimed to have targeted the souls of the punished; however, he observes that ‘the body’ is also directly involved:

[P]ower relations have an immediate hold upon it; they invest it, mark it, train it, torture it, force it to carry out tasks, to perform ceremonies, to emit signs. This political investment of the body is bound up, in accordance with complex reciprocal relations, with its economic use; it is largely as a force of production that the body is invested with relations of power and domination; but, on the other hand, its constitution as labour power is possible only if it is caught up in a system of subjection (in which need is also a political instrument meticulously prepared, calculated and used); the body becomes a useful force only if it is both a productive body and a subjected body.[[81]](#footnote-81)

A Handmaid is a literal manifestation of the ‘subjected’ and ‘productive’ body, whose ‘economic use’ and function in Gilead is to ‘reproduce’. In order to be a ‘useful force’ for Gilead, she needs to be docile as well as ‘productive’, so that she can be manipulated to serve the benefits of patriarchy. This docility leads her to obey the Commanders since they create laws that serve to regulate Gileadean society to their vision.

Atwood’s novel explores the ways in which Gileadean values are reinforced through disciplining the female and maternal body, the ways in which a patriarchal system is reinforced by women’s internalization of these values and self-policing, and the ways in which these values are reinforced through women’s participation in disciplining. In the next section, I discuss Atwood’s extension of the Foucauldian notions and explore the ways in which Atwood’s female characters resist and subvert the patriarchal oppression.

1. **The Tale of Identity**

In Atwood’s text, while Gileadean government controls the power network and enforces the disciplinary power on the body, Offred’s narrative represents the resistance Foucault introduces as an innate element of the network. Her memories of the past, especially her recollections of her mother and her daughter, play a significant role in this narrative of resistance and give her the knowledge and strength to survive. Gilead, through enforcing patriarchal narratives of womanhood and motherhood, does not allow any alternative narratives. Although Offred is confined by the Gileadean definition of her selfhood, her memories of the past and of an alternative truth provide her with the means of resistance. The mother-child relationship in Gilead is transformed into a mechanical system, in which the children who do not measure up to the state standards are discarded. Nonetheless, Offred remembers the time when the mother-child tie was meaningful and recalls that her mother, a separatist feminist, once told her that she was a ‘wanted child’ (*HT* 120). Although we do not know her daughter’s name, it seems that she is always on Offred’s mind. One night, Offred dreams of their attempted escape, running with her daughter, holding her hand, and protecting her, but then they are arrested, and she sees how she was taken from her. Offred narrates, ‘Of all the dreams this is the worst’ (*HT* 85). Offred’s recollections of her mother and daughter are a contrast to the Gileadean definition of mothering and provide her with the means to challenge the reality into which she is forced.

Offred’s narrative centres on her resistance against the Gileadean power structure, which suggests that Atwood has an optimistic view of power’s operation on the body, and we can identify in her work the implications of Hélène Cixous’ idea of feminine language and its role in liberating women from patriarchal oppression. In ‘Sorties’ (1975), Cixous writes that ‘philosophical discourse both orders and reproduces all thought’, creating values on the basis of the binary opposition of ‘activity/passivity’, and while man is associated with activity, ‘either the woman is passive; or she doesn’t exist’.[[82]](#footnote-82) In ‘The Laugh of The Medusa’ (1976), Cixous expresses her thoughts on female identity, arguing that since language is masculine, women’s voices cannot be heard, leading to their marginalization. Therefore she argues that language is the key to resist patriarchal repression: ‘Woman must write herself: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies’.[[83]](#footnote-83) Cixous argues that women need first to take back their bodies from the patriarchal beliefs and own them again if they want to subvert the political and cultural constructions of womanhood, and only when women produce feminine texts can they re-inhabit their identity.

Cixous asserts that ‘it is time for women to start scoring their feats in written and oral language’,[[84]](#footnote-84) because finding language is liberating. According to her, writing and transforming the history of female subjugation operates at two levels: ‘a) Individually. By writing her self, woman will return to the body which has been more than confiscated from her, and b) An act that will also be marked by woman's seizing the occasion to speak, hence her shattering entry into history, which has always been based on her suppression’.[[85]](#footnote-85) For Cixous, ‘*écriture feminine’* is different from man’s. She shares this idea with Irigaray, who ties women’s physical differences to feminine language. Exploring ‘the multiple nature of female desire and language’, she argues that female sexuality is ‘more diversified, more multiple in its differences, more complex, more subtle, than is commonly imagined’, therefore feminine language is disruptive and fragmented.[[86]](#footnote-86) The structure and the narrative mode of Atwood’s novel echo these descriptions of feminine body and language. Offred’s narrative starts in the present, but she often writes about the past, using a retrospective narration that consists of many flashbacks. The novel’s temporal structure and its alternating use of time and place as titles for different chapters echo Irigaray’s description of woman’s language: a language, in which ‘“she” sets off in all directions leaving “him” unable to discern the coherence of any meaning’.[[87]](#footnote-87) Offred’s narrative is far from the linear and logical writing which suggests that Atwood is consciously applying the patriarchal view of feminine as ‘whimsical’, ‘incomprehensible’, ‘agitated’ and ‘capricious’ to her narrative style.[[88]](#footnote-88) Women can transform their subordination into their power using mimicry of that which is historically assigned to women: ‘One must assume the feminine role deliberately. Which means already to convert a form of subordination into an affirmation, and thus to begin to thwart it’.[[89]](#footnote-89) Therefore, through writing the feminine experience of male-defined oppression into masculine language, Atwood challenges the patriarchal definition of the maternal to establish female authority.

Cixous argues that ‘writing is precisely *the very possibility of change*, the space that can serve as a springboard for subversive thought, the precursory movement of a transformation of social and cultural structures’.[[90]](#footnote-90) Although writing is forbidden for women in Gilead, Offred seizes the occasion to write when the Commander asks her to play Scrabble with him, which is also forbidden now, and it is no surprise that the first word she spells in the game is *Larynx* (*HT* 149): the voice box. Playing with words and using language is very significant in Offred’s journey towards reclaiming her body which is reduced to its birthing function to serve Gilead’s notion of motherhood. Atwood’s narrative echoes Cixous’ idea that in order to reclaim the maternal body and oppose gender oppression, women need to start writing: ‘Write your self. Your body must be heard. Only then will the immense resources of the unconscious spring forth’.[[91]](#footnote-91)

Adrienne Rich also focuses on re-writing female identity and the maternal in her writings. Rich’s poem ‘Diving into the Wreck’ speaks of a woman who dives into the wreck ‘to see the damage that was done / and the treasures that prevail’.[[92]](#footnote-92) Having observed that this is a poem of a journey in which old myths are re-visited and the knowledge behind them is revealed, Atwood argues that the wreck ‘is the wreck of obsolete myths, particularly myths about men and women. She is journeying to something that is already in the past, in order to discover for herself the reality behind the myth’.[[93]](#footnote-93) For Rich, ‘book of myths’ signifies the knowledge of the male-dominated society and represents such ‘knowledge’ as ‘common’, ‘given’, and ‘normative’, which feeds into hegemonic gendered patterns. If women want to take their turn telling the history and reclaim feminine identity beyond a restrictive model of woman as wife and mother, they need to acquire their own language.

Rich has observed that literature has helped maintain the gender hierarchy throughout history by limiting women’s roles solely to motherhood in the domestic sphere; hence, women need to re-visit and revise the old texts in order to challenge their narrow portrayals of women’s roles in society and subvert female subjugation. Atwood’s allusions to the Biblical stories in *The Handmaid’s Tale* explore the nature of patriarchal myth-making in totalitarian society, and suggest the significance of revising these myths in deconstructing and subverting women’s oppression. It is essential to explore the ways in which myths become ‘the carriers of ideas and ideologies’, and it is the task of writers like Atwood to ‘use and abuse’ the myths to serve their purpose. [[94]](#footnote-94) Myths of motherhood mainly represent the dominant social and cultural values. Hence in order to challenge hegemonic patterns, the existing patriarchal myths need to be deconstructed.

Myths need to be continuously read, questioned, and rejected in order to incorporate socio-political changes and assimilate new experiences. Rich argues that ‘re-vision’ is essential in order to reverse women’s social oppression: ‘[r]e-vision – the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction – is for women more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival. Until we can understand the assumptions in which we are drenched we cannot know ourselves’.[[95]](#footnote-95) Atwood has practised this type of re-vision in *The Penelopiad* (2005), which is her transmutation of Homer’s *The Odyssey*. It tells the story of Penelope, Odysseus’ ‘quintessential faithful wife’;[[96]](#footnote-96) however, Atwood chooses Penelope as the narrator of her adaptation. Having argued that ‘The story as told in *The Odyssey* doesn’t hold water: there are too many inconsistencies’, Atwood rewrites not only the story of Penelope, but also that of the twelve hanged maids: ‘I’ve always been haunted by the hanged maids; and in *The Penelopiad*, so is Penelope herself’.[[97]](#footnote-97) While maidservants and their deaths are treated as a minor and insignificant incident in Homer’s story, they gain a focal place in Atwood’s narrative and are cast as the Chorus. *The Penelopiad* is the narration of Penelope’s story from *her* point of view, narrating her maiden life in Sparta, her marriage to Odysseus, and her life in her husband’s absence. Penelope’s narrative explores the double standards between genders, narrates the story of women’s rape and execution in the patriarchal society and Penelope’s survival amidst all the turmoil, and gives the reader a new perspective on the story. In *The Penelopiad* and *The Handmaid’s Tale*, Atwood confronts patriarchal myths and patterns while simultaneously working within those patterns and myths. Her novels contribute to revisiting and revising the myths and introducing new narrations that explore the truth behind the myths, the truths about masculine power and female identity. In order to break free from the domination of males, as Rich suggests, women writers need to study literature, and question and alter the way women are represented and /or are led to imagine themselves: ‘[w]e need to know the writing of the past, and know it differently than we have ever known it; not to pass on a tradition but to break its hold over us’.[[98]](#footnote-98)

1. **Conclusion**

*The Handmaid’s Tale* centres on reproduction and motherhood. It is Atwood’s response to the social debates and political turmoil of the late twentieth century, focusing on women’s suppression under totalitarian systems. She also uses mythical traditions as the base of her depiction of the dystopian Gilead and its misogynistic policies. This reflection of social and political controversies as well as her use of myths and Biblical stories in her novel forms an amalgam of the imaginary and the real. While her use of the social incidents makes the narration familiar enough for the audience to create a sense of sympathy, by using an imaginary setting for the novel she creates the distance that is needed for a critical view. This familiarization and estrangement suggests that although this is not the real world and Offred is not a real woman, this could happen anywhere and everywhere. In *The Handmaid’s Tale,* Atwood gives Foucault’s theory of the omnipresent power and its hold over the body a rather optimistic twist. She remarks in an interview that she decided to give *The Handmaid’s Tale* a hopeful tone: ‘I'm an optimist. I like to show that the Third Reich, the Fourth Reich, the Fifth Reich did not last forever’.[[99]](#footnote-99) Offred, once silenced and suppressed under the patriarchal narration of the maternal, becomes the voice of the marginalized under totalitarian systems. By the end of the novel, Gilead does not exist anymore, and despite all its efforts in silencing women, Offred’s narrative is the only evidence of Gileadean society that has survived. Atwood argues that the aim of suppressing writers, singers and journalists under totalitarian governments ‘is to silence the voice, abolish the word, so that the only voices and word left are those of the one in power. Elsewhere, the word itself is thought to have power; that’s why so much trouble is taken to silence it.[[100]](#footnote-100) The ending of the tale is vague with regard to the explanation of how Offred’s life story might have ended, but what is important is that it is her voice and her words that survive and challenge the patriarchal constructions of the maternal body and identity. In the following chapters, I will examine other narratives of the maternal and explore in what ways women have challenged and rewritten the patriarchal myths and traditions.

**Chapter 2**

**Matrilineage and Womanism: the Role of Mothering in**

**Women’s Empowerment and Marginality**

And so our mothers and grandmothers have, more often than not anonymously, handed on the creative spark, the seed of the flower they themselves never hoped to see.

Alice Walker[[101]](#footnote-101)

Your mother helped hold your sister down.

Alice Walker[[102]](#footnote-102)

1. **Introduction**

The two statements above, both by Alice Walker, indicate her ambivalence towards the role of maternal figures in providing positive and distinctly less positive role models for their ‘grand/daughters’ and ‘sisters’. While the first quote celebrates the role of matrilineage in passing down the spirit of creativity and authority among women, the second one represents Walker’s critical view of women’s role in forcing patriarchal values and traditions upon their daughters. Walker’s claims about the dual role of mothering in narrations of the maternal will shape the argument of this chapter. As I explore her views on motherhood, an examination of the development of her ‘womanist’ ideology is essential since it centres on the role of mothers and grandmothers in daughters’ lives and addresses the issue of matrilineage that I explore in her novels. Womanism, an approach that Walker presented as an alternative to feminism, challenges the issue of the exclusivity of feminism, especially in the field of literary scholarship, which has contributed to the marginalization of women of colour due to its essential Eurocentric, white, middle-class model of womanhood. As Layli Phillips writes, ‘Womanism is a social change perspective rooted in Black women’s and other women of color’s everyday experiences and everyday methods of problem solving in everyday spaces, extended to the problem of ending all forms of oppression for all people’.[[103]](#footnote-103) Womanism offers women of colour a political framework for their struggle with patriarchal patterns which have oppressed them through restraining norms and negative stereotypes. It seeks to celebrate the ways in which women negotiate oppressions in the world. It is black women's approach to the construction of their own cultural and ‘racially’ specific forms of women-centred activism and ideology. Walker’s womanism centres on the concept of mother-daughter relationships, and while she celebrates the strength and courage women can inherit from mothers and mother figures and by which they can be inspired in their fight against marginality, she does not ignore the role women have played as an extension of patriarchy.

In this chapter, calling on both the literary and theoretical womanist texts of Alice Walker – *The Color Purple* (1982), *Possessing the Secret of Joy* (1992), and her collections of essays *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens: Womanist Prose* (1983) – I seek to show how Walker’s notions of matrilineage and mother-daughter relationships are applicable to two Persian texts – Simin Daneshvar’s 1961 ‘Shahri Chon Behesht’ (‘A City Like Paradise’) and Moniru Ravanipur’s 1991 ‘Sang-haye Sheytan’ (‘Satan’s Stones’), and also to demonstrate these women writers’ activism in depicting the ambivalent role of matrilineage and challenging patriarchal values. As I previously explored Aunts’ role in suppressing Handmaids in Atwood’s text, I further analyse the concept of complicit mothers and maternal figures in African and Iranian contexts, while exploring the ways in which women’s constructive relationships with each other lead to female empowerment in Walker’s womanist narratives.

I would like to briefly explore the reasons why and the ways in which womanism was introduced to literary criticism before focusing on Walker’s ideas about mother-daughter relationships and the centrality of matrilineage in her womanist theory. As the critical and theoretical feminist discourse of the twentieth century questioned the representation of women as inferior beings in the works of many canonical male writers, it also brought to academic inquiry the construction of the white, middle-class model as representative of all women. Having ignored various cultural, racial, sexual, and class identities, these feminist theories neglected the majority of women who did not fit into this Eurocentric model of womanhood. Thus early feminist criticism, as Tuzyline Jitta Allan sets forth, ‘proved just as exclusionary and controversial as the male social structures it decried. The critical project to unearth and reinstate women writers buried beneath age-long patriarchal neglect or scorn seemed to reenact, through its own neglect of nonwhite women, the very process it set out to correct’.[[104]](#footnote-104)

This hegemonic feminist attitude not only omitted women of colour from feminist critical practice, but it also specifically neglected black women writers who were either completely ignored or only briefly mentioned. bell hooks, a prominent American feminist author and activist, has noted the scarcity of diverse voices in popular feminist theory in her 1984 work, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*. Having observed that ‘To be in the margin is to be part of the whole but outside the main body’,[[105]](#footnote-105) hooks uses her book as a platform to discuss the marginalised voices in feminist works. hooks challenges feminists to consider gender’s relation to race and offers a new and more inclusive feminist theory, stating: ‘It is essential for continued feminist struggle that black women recognize the special vantage point our marginality gives us and make use of this perspective to criticize the dominant racist, classist, sexist hegemony as well as to envision and create a counter-hegemony’.[[106]](#footnote-106)

hooks’ critique was part of the development of black feminist criticism, a response to the marginalization of black women, aiming to unearth and restore black women’s writing. The mere existence of a feminist movement was a crucial prerequisite for the development of feminist literature and women's studies, which focused primarily on examining literature; however, as Barbara Smith states, ‘The fact that a parallel Black feminist movement has been much slower in evolving cannot help but have impact upon the situation of Black women writers and artists and explains in part why during this very same period we have been so ignored’.[[107]](#footnote-107) It was the hierarchical, racialized concept of gender within the community of academic feminism that led to an exclusive recognition of white women writers and neglect of women of colour. As Patricia Hill Collins asserts in *Black Feminist Thought* (1990), ‘one aspect of suppression is that of omission’;[[108]](#footnote-108) hence, the promotion of the notion of a universal woman as white and middle class and the absence of black feminist theories from feminist works made it hard for them to challenge the hegemony of the mainstream scholarship. As a social critical theory, black feminism involves academic knowledge and institutional practices that target the central problems African American women face. Collins observes that the ‘exclusion of Black women’s ideas from mainstream academic discourse and the curious placement of African American women intellectuals in feminist thinking’ led U.S. black women intellectuals to find themselves in outsider-within positions.[[109]](#footnote-109) Black women were excluded from both feminist thought, which mainly consisted of white women, and black socio-political thought, which mainly consisted of black men. Walker explains how this ‘solitary, lonely position, the position of an outcast’ helped her to ‘see people and things, really to notice relationships’,[[110]](#footnote-110) and that ‘the gift of loneliness is sometimes a radical vision of society or one’s people that has not previously been taken into account’.[[111]](#footnote-111) Such an outside-within location provided critics such as Walker with a unique point of view that helped develop the black feminist movement.

To Walker, who wanted a worldview that could bring the marginalized black women’s experience to the centre, black feminism seemed unsatisfactory, since it still was a subcategory of feminism. Hence, she developed her ‘womanist’ theory which, as the title of her autobiographical and politically motivated collection of essays *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens: Womanist Prose* (1983) suggests, focused on the central role of mothers and matrilineage in women of colour’s struggle for authority. Walker’s emphasis on motherhood as the core of her womanist discourse reflects the centrality of the concept in both African and African American cultures. In African societies, mothers are highly respected as they ensure their people’s continuity. However, this has negative outcomes, as women can be circumcised in order to be ‘honoured’ as wives and mothers and a ‘barren’ woman will be an outcast in such societies. In African American communities, mothers are also regarded highly, as according to the custom of slavery in the United States, a child’s lineage was determined by the mother’s status. Therefore, a black woman’s child was considered ‘black’ and born into slavery, while a white woman’s child was free.[[112]](#footnote-112) Walker’s focus on motherhood in her womanist narratives reflects all these contrasting elements and demonstrates that in order to understand the woman of colour’s struggle, womanhood and motherhood should be analysed in the related socio-historical context.

Walker introduced the term ‘womanist’ in her short story ‘Coming Apart’ in 1979, and later defined the term and explored the theory in 1983 in *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens*. Walker defines a ‘womanist’ as ‘A black feminist or feminist of color’ by differentiating between womanism and feminism: ‘Womanist is to feminist as purple to lavender’.[[113]](#footnote-113) This statement affirms that womanism is related to and shares commonalities with feminism. Also, through presenting womanism as the broad colour of purple and feminism as the purple variation of lavender, it subverts the perception of feminism as the main category and feminisms of colour as subcategories, expanding womanist theory’s significance beyond the feminist critical agenda. Womanist thought gives black scholars the chance to tackle issues particular to black women’s culture and history. While the lavender feminist critical writing is limited, ineffectual, and essentially racist in Walker’s view, the purple womanism is more comprehensive, or, as she mentions in ‘Coming Apart’, ‘more common’.[[114]](#footnote-114) Having defined ‘womanist’ as a woman who ‘loves other women’, and favours women’s culture, emotional flexibility, and strength, Walker immediately adds that a womanist loves ‘individual men’, too, and is committed to ‘survival and wholeness of entire people, male *and* female’.[[115]](#footnote-115) As Layli Phillips observes, ‘womanism does not emphasize or privilege gender or sexism; rather, it elevates all sites and forms of oppression, whether they are based on social-address categories like gender, race, or class, to a level of equal concern and action’.[[116]](#footnote-116) Since black womanhood represents the racial, class, and gender oppression, the womanist thought provides the viewpoint needed to address and challenge these issues.

Having briefly explored the foundation of Walker’s womanist idealogy, I explore in the next section of the chapter the ways in which Walker’s womanist writings portray women’s dual role in female subjugation and survival. She argues in her essay ‘Saving the Life That is Your Own: The Importance of Models in the Artist’s Life’: ‘It is, in the end, the saving of lives that we writers are about… We do it because we care… We care because we know this: *the life we save is our own’.*[[117]](#footnote-117) To save someone, for Walker, means to liberate them from an oppressive cycle of violence. Walker’s narratives represent the key role of maternal relationships in both internalizing oppressive traditions and restoring the knowledge of the past for women’s empowerment. I will then examine her womanist notions in relation to Iranian women’s narratives of mother-daughter relationships, re-evaluating her ideas of matrilineage in a Persian context.

1. **Alice Walker’s Novels and the Ambivalence of Mothering**

In her essay ‘In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens,’ Walker expresses her respect for the black women in history who have exercised and passed on their creativity despite their subordination in sexist and racist communities. She writes about mothers and grandmothers who were driven to ‘a numb and bleeding madness by the springs of creativity in them for which there was no release… Creators, who lived lives of spiritual waste, because they were so rich in spirituality – which is the basis of Art – that the strain of enduring their unused and unwanted talent drove them insane’.[[118]](#footnote-118) These women used their creativity to produce pieces of art whose quality depended on the limited materials the society would provide them with, and waited for the day when they could reveal their gift to the world. Alas, most of them were long dead by the time the world was ready for this revelation. Although Walker mourns the loss of so many talents in the past, she celebrates the legacies – ‘respect for the possibilities’ and ‘the will to grasp them’[[119]](#footnote-119) – that were handed down from ancestors: ‘And so our mothers and grandmothers have, more often than not anonymously, handed on the creative spark, the seed of the flower they themselves never hoped to see: or like a sealed letter they could not plainly read’.[[120]](#footnote-120) The ‘sealed letter’ Walker received contained the oral rhythms and stories of her mother and grandmother that Walker has drawn on in her narratives. Education, in Walker’s mother’s view, was tied to that possibility and the ability to grasp it, and she tried her best to provide her children with it: ‘she battled with the white landlord who had the misfortune to suggest that her children did not need to go to school’.[[121]](#footnote-121) Walker’s mother bought her three gifts, which echoes what Walker says about a mother’s legacy: a sewing machine to be independent and self-sufficient, a suitcase to travel and get experienced, and a typewriter to be a writer and a poet.[[122]](#footnote-122) Walker has used her works as the means to pass down the knowledge and the legacy black women need in order to survive the oppression they face in their lives. In an interview with John O’Brien, Walker states that her major preoccupation in her works is the ‘spiritual survival’ of her people, and she explains that her commitment is to ‘exploring the oppressions, the insanities, the loyalties, and the triumphs of black women’.[[123]](#footnote-123) In Walker’s fiction, the central characters’ interaction with other women in society or the maternal ancestors is not necessarily helpful in the process of their maturation and liberation; in fact, it can sometimes be even more conducive to their silence and oppression. Nonetheless, most of her oppressed female characters gain the wherewithal to discover the inner strength through their interaction and friendship with other women: ‘There is no story more moving to me personally than one in which one woman saves the life of another, and saves herself, and slays whatever dragon has appeared. And I know that, on a subconscious level, if not a conscious one, this is the work black women wish they were able to do all the time’.[[124]](#footnote-124)

* 1. **Mothering and Creative Procreation in *The Color Purple***

*The Color Purple* (1983), which won Walker a Pulitzer Prize and an American Book Award, tells the story of an exploited black woman who achieves triumph over subjugation and dehumanization and finds her spiritual awakening with the help of other black women, as well as preparing spaces for other oppressed individuals or communities and helping them achieve personal integrity in the end. Celie, the main character, starts writing letters to God after her stepfather rapes and beats her and tells her never to tell anybody about it but God. She gives birth to two children, both of whom are presumed to be killed or sold by her stepfather. She is then married off to a widower by whom she is emotionally and physically exploited, once again. She is humiliated and silenced by her husband into a state of denial of her identity, which is visible in her description of his conversation with her: ‘You black, you pore, you ugly, you a woman. Goddam, he say, you nothing at all’ (*CP* 176).[[125]](#footnote-125) Celie’s vernacular narrations represent female suppression and domestic violence due to male dominance, but they also offer a reading of racial conflicts and struggles.

Although Celie starts her letters as a ‘black, pore, and ugly’ woman, she learns and gains strength from assertive independent maternal figures who inspire and support her to develop her individual sense of identity. Sofia, Celie’s daughter-in-law, is an independent and strong-willed woman from whom she learns to struggle against racial discrimination and domestic violence. She is a woman who is not afraid of opposing and acting against the stereotypical roles of women. Nonetheless, it is Shug, an ex-lover of Celie’s husband, who plays the most important role in effecting change in Celie’s character by helping her transform and extricate herself from subjugation. Shug is a free soul who refuses to settle for a life of domesticity and chooses to be a blues singer in the face of all odds and despite the discrimination against women singers. Celie’s image of God is a ‘big and old and tall and greybearded and white’ man with ‘blue eyes’ (*CP* 165), and Shug explains to her that it is the white male patriarchy that has injected the male-dominated images into her mind. The moment Celie realizes that her definition of God is the product of the white-male-oriented standards and responsible for her subjugation, she denounces the norms of the male-dominated society. Shug is not a controlling mother figure, so she does not dictate to her any specific image of God. Rather, she tells her to look for God in ‘everything’, which will give her the ‘feeling of being part of everything’. Trying to teach Celie to believe in herself and to see herself as equal to anyone, Shug tells her to get ‘man’ off her ‘eyeball’ in order to be able to see:

Man corrupt everything, say Shug. He on our box of grits, in your head, and all over the radio. He try make you think he everywhere. Soon as you think he everywhere, you think he God. But he ain’t. Whenever you trying to pray, and man plop himself on the other end of it, tell him to git lost, say Shug. Conjure up flowers, wind, water, a big rock. (*CP* 168)

The omnipresent ‘man’, representing all patriarchal patterns that have ruled over her life and identity since a young age, is the mediator through which Celie has experienced the world, and Shug helps her clear her eyes and deconstruct those patterns. In the beginning of their relationship, it is Celie who looks after Shug during her illness and offers her a care and support only a mother could give. Nonetheless, it is the strong, independent Shug who provides Celie with the maternal figure to whom she looks up and by whose personality she is inspired.

Celie, Walker writes, ‘has not accepted an alien description of who she is; neither has she accepted completely an alien tongue to tell us about it. Her being is affirmed by the language in which she is revealed, and like everything about her it is characteristic, hard-won, and authentic’.[[126]](#footnote-126) Celie herself tells Albert, her husband, ‘We all have to start somewhere if us want to do better, and our own self is what us have to hand’ (*CP* 278). Celie denounces the patriarchy but refuses to replace it by any other hegemony; she becomes the tailor of the ‘sexless’ pants offering anyone, regardless of race or gender, one ‘comfortable’ pair of pants. When asked by her husband what was special about her pants, she answers: ‘Anybody can wear them’(*CP* 230). The idea behind the pants reflects the inclusive and universal nature of womanist thought, which, unlike feminism, is not merely for or about women. Celie has evolved into the womanist scholar, who thinks about and designs for everyone no matter what gender, race, or class they belong to.

Celie manages to emerge from years of oppression thanks to the love she receives from Shug, Nettie, and other supportive black women in her life. As E. Ellen Barker argues, it is through ‘the unifying bond between black women…“their friendships, their love, their shared oppressions”… that they collectively gain the strength to separate themselves from the bondage of their past and piece together a free and equal existence for themselves and for those they love’.[[127]](#footnote-127) Her freedom, initiated by Shug’s help in rejecting the traditional notions of divinity, seeing God as an ‘all white’ figure ‘looking like some stout white man work at the bank’ (*CP* 80), is complete when she finds herself at peace with her own self as well as her surroundings when she addresses her last letter to ‘Dear God. Dear Stars, dear peoples. Dear Everything. Dear God’ and ends with ‘I think this the youngest us ever felt’ (*CP* 244). Walker’s narration of Celie’s rebirth represents her womanist thought that black women can overcome oppression and subjugation through bonding with mother figures. In their battle for freedom and redemption, women’s relationship with each other plays a significant role. Without Shug’s help, Celie could not challenge her husband’s abusive treatment and would fail to construct her identity.

The focal point of Walker’s concept of matrilineage is women’s empowerment through maternal legacy, but her womanist narratives also suggest that men’s patriarchal views and manners can change through building a constructive relationship with empowered independent women. Even the term womanism includes the word ‘man’, suggesting that men are an essential part of women’s lives and their struggles against oppressions on multiple platforms. Walker has created an abundance of strong, loving women who survive and triumph in spite of the odds in her works, but she has been criticized for projecting a negative male image. Louis H. Pratt argues that one of the principal shortcomings in Walker’s works is that her black male characters are portrayed ‘either as tranquil men whose existence must be validated and filtered through the consciousness of her women, or they are presented as weak, self-centered, turbulent men whose humanity is placed in jeopardy by their inability to develop loving relationships with their wives and children’.[[128]](#footnote-128) Nonetheless, Walker has created violent male characters who change through the novel, and the growth from vulnerability to relative strength is sometimes reflected in her male characters’ movement toward wholeness.

Walker, questioning the negative critiques of her portrayals of men and asking ‘Why is it that they only see, they can only identify the negative behavior?’, explains that ‘it’s because it’s the negative behavior, the macho behavior, that they see as male behavior and that when the men stop using that behavior, when the men become gentle… they are no longer considered men and there is an inability even to see them’.[[129]](#footnote-129) Walker’s men are the product of the racist, colonial climate in which they were brought up, and what they suffered at the white patriarchy’s hands was translated into the gender oppression they force on their women and children. In *The Color Purple*, Harpo, who has developed an eating disorder, keeps beating his wife Sofia. When Celie questions his behaviour, Harpo complains that he believes a wife should listen and do what her husband wants, but Sofia does not. He has learned this from his father: ‘Harpo ast his daddy why he beat me. Mr.\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ say, Cause she my wife. Plus, she stubborn. All women good for—he don’t finish’ (*CP* 23). This is the patriarchal definition of a husband and wife relationship, which leads to women’s oppression. Harpo’s constant eating represents his ingestion of patriarchal values, but when Celie advises and guides him in his marital relationship, he acknowledges his fault, leans over and vomits all the oppressive patterns he has been fed so far. Harpo and his father transform into loving and supportive men through women’s guidance and support. Walker’s womanist narrative accounts for the ways in which black women empower black men, offering a pattern for men who refuse to stay in the vicious cycle of abuse and are transformed into nurturing people through independent women’s guidance and support. This is a womanist narrative, where man and woman, despite all the past cruelties and tragedies, learn to live together harmoniously in a house that belongs to both of them.

* 1. **Matrilineage and Complicity in *Possessing the Secret of Joy***

This novel, focusing on female genital mutilation (FGM), traces individual and cultural motivations for this millennia-old practice in Africa and explores the role of women in imposing patriarchal traditions on their daughters. Focusing on the poisonous impacts of FGM on women’s lives and its repercussions in Olinka society, the novel is another example of Walker’s womanist approach to a phenomenon which has contributed to black women’s subjugation. The novel chronicles Tashi’s scarred life under the mental, physical, and emotional effects of this misogynistic practice and depicts her struggle to comprehend and survive them. Starting with Tashi’s childhood, the story is told through multiple voices, including those of Tashi and her family members. It ends with her execution at the hands of her country’s post-colonial government in Africa for murdering the woman who circumcised her and her sister, who bled to death.

The novel received a mixed reception. Some media critiques reflected the apprehension of American and European societies that such a ‘primitive’ practice still existed in some parts of the world; however, others suggested that these practices are part of African culture, and that Walker needs to leave African women to their customs. One criticism is that the novel, through highlighting and denouncing female circumcision, pays homage to the post-colonial West-Other dichotomy: it provides the means to maintain the image of Africa as the ‘dark continent’ or ‘anti-civilization,’ and represents the colonial quest ‘to prove that everything non-Western or non-European in Origin must be eradicated’.[[130]](#footnote-130) In contrast, the West, in Walker’s novel, is pictured as a false promise that brings nothing but more pain to the people and more destruction to the land. The two representatives of western culture in Olinka, where the novel is set, are the Christian missionaries and the pharmaceutical company, and while the former offers nothing but another patriarchal pattern to succumb to and follow, the latter illegally massacres female monkeys to produce vaccines and, as Walker describes, grow ‘their precious “cultures”’ (*PSJ* 248). What Walker does here is to parallel the way western scientists posit the body of the animals as a commodity whose definition is decided by the elite power with how woman’s body and its function are defined by patriarchal ideologies. The female body and the African body are portrayed as sites of oppression, and Walker challenges and condemns both international and intra-national colonization in her writing.

Although the novel helped to bring worldwide awareness and attention to the subject of female genital mutilation, Walker was accused of writing without sufficient nuance about the operation and ‘the relationships between the ritual and colonialism, racism, sexism, and violence’.[[131]](#footnote-131) In response to these criticisms, I argue that Walker, by using FGM as the focal point of her narrative, offers a novel perspective on black women’s specific experience of sexuality and mothering. Walker’s emphasis on the role of mothers in her womanist narrative can be associated with the historical background of slavery and African American motherhood. During the period of slavery in the United States, not only were slave women valued for themselves as labour force on plantations, but also they were valued for their breeding and nurturing qualities. Since slave families were often separated, the mother was usually the only one in the position to safeguard her children’s survival and turn them into producers of society.[[132]](#footnote-132) This dual role of the black woman has created the stereotype of the slave mother as the selfless strong mammy figure, which has also led to the internalisation of a similar image of an African American woman who lives a life of sacrifice and whose sexuality is only defined in terms of breeding. Walker questions and criticises such a narrow representation and lack of imagination about black women’s sexuality in her 1979 essay ‘One Child of One’s Own’. She describes her visit to a feminist artist’s exhibition, Judy Chicago’s image-making project, where great figures of women’s history each had their own plate at ‘The Dinner Party’ represented as ‘creatively imagined vaginas’, except for Sojourner Truth, whose plate was represented as faces. The ‘weeping’, ‘screaming’, and ‘smiling’ faces of African women meant to signify their sufferings, heroism, and joy.[[133]](#footnote-133) Nonetheless, the fact that at an exhibition which aims to celebrate female sexuality represented by vaginas, the African woman is denied the same image of female identity indicates that she is viewed as essentially different. In *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, Walker returns to the issue of black female identity, and as Maria Lauret argues, she denies the readers a romanticised image of the ‘strong black woman’ by shedding light on Tashi’s distressing experiences; however, instead of being reduced to a mere victim, Tashi eventually becomes the activist who calls for female solidarity in the struggle to eradicate FGM.[[134]](#footnote-134)

Walker’s narration of female genital mutilation raises awareness of the social, racial, and sexual roots of this practice, and reveals the relation between power and the control of female body in male-dominated societies. As Patricia Hill Collins acknowledges:

An ongoing tension exists between efforts to mold the institution of Black motherhood to benefit systems of race, gender and class oppression, and efforts by African-American women to define and value our own experiences with motherhood. The controlling images of the mammy, the matriarch, and the welfare mother and the practices they justify are designed to oppress.[[135]](#footnote-135)

Mammies in African culture are believed to be ‘good’ mothers since they are faithful and obedient, while Matriarchs are ‘bad’ because they work outside their home and are believed to push away their men. Welfare mothers are also considered ‘bad’ because they are seen as lazy, overly fertile and irresponsible. [[136]](#footnote-136) Such categorization reveals that women are only valued according to their mothering qualities and these values are passed down from mothers to daughters. As I previously discussed Foucault’s idea of body as the site of regulation and an ‘object and target of power’,[[137]](#footnote-137) I argued that Foucault neglects gender as an important signifier of the ways in which power is not evenly applied. Walker’s text once again supports this idea that gender counts as the female body is controlled through male-defined values in order to preserve patriarchy. As Handmaids’ identity was limited to childbirth and their body was confined and abused to serve this idea, Olinka women’s identity is only defined according to their reproductive values. Almost from birth, Olinka mothers prepare their daughters to become wives and mothers, and circumcision is considered an essential element of a young girl’s initiation into becoming a woman. If a girl is not circumcised, she remains a child and no self-respecting man marries her since she has not gone through the process of acceding to womanhood. Walker, as Bates argues, ‘sees female circumcision as taking sexual gratification out of women’s control, making pleasure a practice enjoyed only by men, and relegating women to the role of servants rather than participants in the act’.[[138]](#footnote-138) Not only does the circumcision prevent women from exploring their sexuality, but it also, supposedly, ‘renders them more suitable for marriage, less likely to seek divorce, and keeps their minds to the preservation of the family’.[[139]](#footnote-139)

One of the mediums through which Walker explores the internalization of patriarchal values and their effects on women’s life is Tashi’s dreams, which reveal male dominance in African heritage and rituals that have been reserved and upheld with the help of mothers and grandmothers. Chantal Zabus argues that Walker’s narrative of excision is in fact about a ritual that is ‘deeply rooted in African mythology in which culture taps to maintain social cohesiveness’.[[140]](#footnote-140) One of the recurring nightmarish dreams of Tashi is that she is imprisoned and tortured in a tall ‘dark tower’ (*PSJ* 232). The tower or the termite hill imagery here is a reference to the Dogon myth of creation which Walker uses in the novel. In this myth, the clitoris is narrated as a termite hill and is considered a threat to male domination (*PSJ* 164-165). The great god Amma creates the Earth: a horizontal body, feminine in nature, with her genitals at the centre. Amma desires the Earth, but when he comes close to her, the termite hill rises and blocks him, so he cuts it off, and has intercourse with her.[[141]](#footnote-141) Walker’s use of this African myth in Tashi’s dream signifies that, as in Adrienne Rich’s view of patriarchal myths, she believes such myths hold the knowledge of male-dominated systems, which have contributed to hegemonic gendered patterns. The transmission of these myths through generations and from mothers to daughters has contributed to women’s suppression. The torture Tashi is subjected to in her dream is symbolic of the mutilation of her genitalia and women’s place in African societies as mere breeders, or as the ‘graybearded, old’ elders of the village say, their ‘sustenance’ (*PSJ* 222). Tashi sees herself as the Queen of the dark tower, ‘trapped…, heavy, wingless and inert’ in the hands of the elders who ‘are being stuffed with food, while nothing but oppressive verbal diarrhea comes out’ (*PSJ* 222). Just like Harpo in *The Color Purple*, men’s constant eating suggests their adoption of oppressive patriarchal values. Through re-writing the oppressive patriarchal myths, Walker takes part in what Rich calls ‘writing as re-vision’ and reveals the role of such myths and women’s internalization of them in female subjugation.

Walker’s criticism of women’s role as an extension of patriarchy is portrayed in another episode where Tashi’s memories of her sister’s circumcision and death haunt her in a nightmare. She dreams of a foot, fighting cocks, and a large cock. The cock is so large that it ‘dwarfed’ Tashi (*PSJ* 70), and is waiting to receive the vulva tossed by the foot. The dream is evoked by her memory of the foot of M’Lissa – the woman who inherited the position of ‘tsunga’ from her mother and was in charge of performing circumcision in the village – who threw Tashi’s sister’s vulva to the cock after performing the circumcision that led to her death. M’Lissa, as the mother of her country, is recognized as a ‘national treasure’ and is privileged due to her inherited role as a ‘tsunga’ who is in charge of destroying women’s sexuality. The fact that the large cock turns out to be a hen reveals the role of women in Olinka society in preserving the patriarchal traditions in general and in holding the young girls down during the procedure in particular. Tashi, while painting her dream on her room’s walls, finds herself ‘painting a design called “crazy road,” a pattern of crisscrosses and dots that the women made with mud on the cotton cloth they wove in the village’ (*PSJ* 70). In her drawing of her nightmare, Tashi unconsciously interconnects the scene of circumcision with the pattern women design on their handwoven clothes, which represents the patriarchal beliefs they help preserve for women in their community. In fact, it was Tashi’s mother, Naffa, who insisted on her elder daughter’s circumcision. M’Lissa recalls to Tashi: ‘she thought all Olinkans demanded their daughters to be bathed… She was the kind of woman who jumped even before the man says boo. You mother helped hold your sister down’ (*PSJ* 253). In her attempt to be a ‘good’ mother who protects her daughter from harm and prepares her for marriage, Naffa brings about her death or, as Tashi says, her ‘murder’ (*PSJ* 79). As Natalie M. Rosinsky argues, ‘Being a “good” woman in a sexist society requires conformity to feminine stereotypes such as passivity, spirituality, or irrationality; being a good mother entails indoctrinating one’s daughter with these false ideas’.[[142]](#footnote-142) Having internalized the Olinkan belief that women must just produce children, work, and teach their daughters to do the same, Naffa decides to bathe Dura. Since women like Naffa derive their primary source of identity from patriarchy, they tend to safeguard the lineage’s position and perpetuate sexual inequality. Although Tashi herself decides to get bathed and continue the legacy of pain, she understands the burden her mother feels for the death of her daughter:

I studied the white rinds of my mother’s heels, and felt in my own heart the weight of Dura’s death settling upon her spirit, like the groundnuts that bent her back. As she staggered under her load, I half expected her footprints, into which I was careful to step, to stain my own feet with tears and blood. But my mother never wept… when called upon to salute the power of the chief and his counselors she could let out a cry that assaulted the very heavens with its praising pain. (*PSJ* 17)

Just as Aunts acted as an extension of Gilead’s patriarchal power and suppressed the Handmaids in Atwood’s narrative, tsungas, having internalized patriarchal values, carry on Olinka’s tradition of female circumcision and inflict suffering and misery on other women.

Walker’s narrative reveals that although women contribute to female suppression, they can also be the source of maternal love and support. The support Tashi receives from other women during her prosecution for the murder of M’Lissa helps her rebuild a constructive bond with her roots and establish her individual identity. Prior to her circumcision, Tashi believes that she will be ‘completely woman. Completely African. Completely Olinka’ (*PSJ* 63); however, after she has healed she finds that ‘her proud walk had become a shuffle’ (*PSJ* 64). Even after her marriage to Adam and move to the U.S, Tashi is unable to find peace and is sunk into depression. Only when she finds the meaning of her nightmares and finds the answer in her culture does she heal from her suffering. Although Tashi’s recovery begins in the United States, it does not reach completion until she returns to her native land, Olinka. The little ancient statues of the African women help her realize and acquire the long-forgotten strength and autonomous selfhood: ‘I have the uncanny feeling that, just at the end of my life, I am beginning to re-inhabit completely the body I long ago left’ (*PSJ* 104).

As matrilineage and female relationship is a key feature in Walker’s womanist thought, Tashi’s process of healing and her survival is closely linked to her relationship with the women of her community and the mother-figures who accompany her on her journey of self-actualization. Tashi’s relationship with her psychoanalysts, Jung and Raye, can be seen as a healthy mother-daughter relationship through which she learns how to explore the roots of her pain and to verbalize it. Through the guidance of these mother figures, Tashi is able to put the fragments of her life together, complete herself, and reach ‘self-actualization’.[[143]](#footnote-143) Her relationship with M’Bati is also a mother-daughter relationship, where she calls Tashi ‘motherly’ (*PSJ* 151). She becomes the symbol of freedom to M’Bati and leaves her the legacies of resistance and knowledge. M’Bati is the daughter Tashi ‘could have’ had, had she not aborted (*PSJ* 149): ‘I am this child’s mother. Otherwise she would not have appeared so vividly, a radiant flower of infinite freshness, in my life’ (*PSJ* 255). As Collins observes, ‘motherhood can serve as a site where Black women express and learn the power of self-definition, the importance of valuing and respecting ourselves, the necessity of self-reliance and independence, and a belief in Black women’s empowerment’.[[144]](#footnote-144) Tashi, speaking the unspeakable and breaking the chain of pain, is the mother figure who leaves other black women the legacy of resistance against patriarchal cultural patterns.

This novel reflects the complexity of Walker’s womanist approach, demonstrating one woman’s struggle to stand up and react to a situation, in which women extend patriarchal oppression. Gerri Bates observes that ‘Walker brings to this novel her characteristic political ethos of protest, resistance, and liberation, offering a sympathetic perspective while championing, in her view, a worthy cause to bring about change’.[[145]](#footnote-145) Walker mentions in *Warrior Marks: Female Genital Mutilation and the Sexual Blinding of Women* (1993) that she wrote *Possessing the Secret of Joy* as a ‘duty’ to her conscience as an educated ‘African-American-Indian’ woman and the ‘reason’ for her education: ‘I believe with all my heart that there is at least one baby girl born on the planet today who will not know the pain of genital mutilation because of my work. And that in this one instance, at least, the pen will prove mightier than the circumciser’s knife’.[[146]](#footnote-146) Although Walker implicates mothers in continuing patriarchal oppression, she also points to the possibility of breaking free from this in a womanist way by connecting to empowering maternal figures and resistance to patriarchal oppression. Walker, by giving voice to Tashi and depicting the controlling power of the cultural traditions and religious practices over women’s sexuality, becomes the mother figure who leaves her readers a legacy of knowledge and joy.

1. **Matrilineage in Persian Texts**
   1. **Defining Gender and Sexuality in Modern Iran**

The principal element of womanism is the self-authored spirit of causing positive social changes through women's constructive relationship with other women. What sets womanism apart is the fact that it is activism based upon the everyday problems and experiences of black women and other women of colour, yet not limited to those. This chapter offers a womanist reading of Iranian texts, since Iranian women have been actively involved in challenging inequality and suppression by narrating the stories of Iranian women. Nonetheless, in order to understand and appreciate their movement, one needs to take into account the atmosphere out of which their struggle rose. I will demonstrate how Iranian women, through narrating their everyday life and challenging patriarchal narrations of maternal experiences and mother-daughter relationships, have resisted hegemonic patterns and contributed to the quest for authority and construction of autonomous selfhood.

For centuries, Iranian women’s demand for equity and full legal and social personhood was consistently ignored and crushed by the conservative patriarchy in the name of religion, chastity, class distinction, beauty, safety, and anatomy. Iranian culture has largely represented women as the second sex and the subsidiary gender, mainly due to the fact the power to rule the country and the pen to write the history of the country both lay in the hands of men. Nonetheless, debates around women’s issues and their socioeconomic situation became widespread among intellectuals, nationalists, and anti-colonial activists by the late nineteenth century, leading to modern Iranian women’s entrance to the world stage as human rights activists, authors, or film directors. Women are still oppressed under restraining laws and male-centred readings of Islamic Scripture in Iran; however, women writers have always been the vibrant forces of change giving voice to the silent and questioning the restricting traditions.

Traditionally, women’s education was considered to be against Islam in most parts of Iran, a general belief that was promoted by clerics and cherished by the patriarchal society. Many educated women had to hide their literacy, because women’s literacy was socially considered as a disgrace for the woman and her family.[[147]](#footnote-147) The experience of domesticity and gender segregation was different according to what social classes women belonged to. While women in rural areas experienced more freedom and exposure to the outside world due to their working in the fields, female seclusion was more strictly enforced in middle or upper-class families where women were taught to become obedient and selfless wives and mothers. However, from the same upper-class society arose a movement in which some women started to challenge the male supremacy and the patriarchal beliefs that denied them basic human rights, amongst which Bibi Khanoom Astarabadi proved to be the most vigorous. Born to a mother in charge of the education of the children in the court of Nasser al-Din Shah, Bibi Khanoom was well aware of the importance of education for women; hence, she founded the first modern school for girls in Iran. However, what make her a prominent figure in the history of Iranian women writers are her articles on the issue of women’s education, particularly her 1895 book *Ma'ayeb al-Rejal* (Failings of Men). Having read a pamphlet called *Ta'deeb al-Nesvan* (Edification of Women) on women’s good manners and punishment, Bibi Khanoom wrote her book as a response to the anonymous writer of the pamphlet, criticising him and other men for their arrogance, hypocrisy, and ignorance in keeping women in the domestic sphere. She charges men with causing chaos and ruining the country by confining women to the kitchens or harems.[[148]](#footnote-148)

As Haideh Moghissi observes in *Populism and Feminism in Iran*, ‘Bibi Khanum’s challenge to male supremacy and her criticism of Iranian society made her the first Iranian woman who dared to question publicly the patriarchal religious and cultural beliefs and practices woven through Iran’s social fabric’.[[149]](#footnote-149) Nonetheless, this was just the start and the tip of the iceberg which was about to emerge and change the social, political, and cultural image of the country. The core of the women’s rights struggle was women’s education, including the establishment of schools for girls and issuing pamphlets on different topics ranging from criticising superstitious beliefs to fighting for national independence. Many female political orators and literary figures started their writings as a quest for equity and autonomy, challenging patriarchal values and developing gender consciousness.

In the past, women had a passive role in Persian literature as beloveds in poems or beautiful figures of myths and legends. Women later became more active in social affairs and the number of women in the field of literature, especially poetry, dramatically increased from the mid-twentieth century onward.[[150]](#footnote-150) Nonetheless, the sexist attitude of the patriarchal culture that promoted male authority and female submission made it hard for many women writers to express female sexuality and gender equality in their works. This was the time Forough Farrokhzad, one of the most influential modern poets in Iran, started publishing her poems in which she refused to succumb to male values, and despite the pressures of the male-centred society of the time, she continued to maintain her voice. In a letter Forough offers a telling account of her struggle in such a condition: ‘I wanted to be a “woman”, that is to say a “human being”. I wanted to say that I too have the right to breathe and to cry out. But others wanted to stifle and silence my screams on my lips and my breath in my lungs’.[[151]](#footnote-151)

The literary movement of revisiting and redefining gender roles in modern women writers’ hands was part of prose fiction, as well, hence the emergence of the first Iranian female fiction writer, Simin Daneshvare, who published her first collection of short stories, *Extinguished Fire*, in 1948. Her 1969 novel *Savushun* (meaning ‘mourners of Siyavash’ and translated and published in English as *A Persian Requiem*), not only was the first novel by an Iranian woman writer, but also became a bestseller. Daneshvar, in most of her works, largely focused on the world and the situation of women, a quality she shared with another influential female novelist Moniru Ravanipur, an influential contemporary writer, whose novels and short stories shed light on women’s life in rural areas of southern Iran. Ravanipur started her writing career after the 1979 Islamic revolution in Iran. Her first book, *Kanizu* (1988), was a collection of short stories, but it was her first novel, *Ahl-e Gharq* (*The Drowned*), set in a fishing village called Jofreh on the Persian Gulf, which helped her achieve nationwide recognition in 1989. Daneshvar and Ravanipur, although very different in their choice of style, provided the space for the Iranian woman – through challenging patriarchal narrations of maternal experiences and mother-daughter relationships – to establish herself as both the subject and the producer of literature and to have her voice heard.

* 1. **Simin Daneshvar’s ‘Shahri Chon Behesht’ and Moniru Ravanipur’s ‘Sang-haye Sheytan’**

In her critiques of feminism, Alice Walker has questioned Virginia Woolf’s remark about a woman’s need of a room of her own,[[152]](#footnote-152) arguing that Woolf’s essay has excluded women of colour because the middle-class white feminist point of view is unable to see the reality of living in a different situation. Walker writes:

Virginia Woolf, in her book, wrote that in order for a woman to write fiction she must have two things, certainly: a room of her own (with key and lock) and enough money to support herself. What then are we to make of Phillis Wheatley, a slave, who owned not even herself? This sickly, frail, Black girl who required a servant of her own at times—her health was so precarious—and who, had she been white, would have been easily considered the intellectual superior of all the women and most of the men in the society of her day.[[153]](#footnote-153)

Walker sees that many writers who are in a similar situation to Phillis Wheatley[[154]](#footnote-154) are outside the space Woolf recognizes for women writers. Similarly, Farzaneh Milani sheds light on the limitations of Woolf’s views, asserting that a woman also needs to have ‘the freedom to leave it and return to it at will’.[[155]](#footnote-155) Woolf’s feminist theory needs to be revisited and revised in order to be applied to other cultures such as Iran’s. As the public square traditionally belongs to men in Iran, women are usually enclosed in the domestic sphere, defined as and called ‘manzel’ (house), confined in ‘andaruni’ (inside house), and denied the liberty to join the public domain at their own will. Milani observes:

Throughout this history of gendered control and discrimination women’s chastity has been inextricably linked with space. Mobility has often been associated with chaos and the opportunity for sexual promiscuity in women… If a woman dares leave her socially designated path, if she abandons her fenced-off space, she is branded a *streetwalker*, a universal term of disrespect for women ‘out of bounds.’… This preoccupation with women’s freedom of movement – its religious underpinnings, its sexual overtones, and its long-term social consequences – has marked Iranian culture from classical times until today.[[156]](#footnote-156)

Simin Daneshvar and Moniru Ravanipur are two Iranian novelists who have taken it upon themselves to create a link between literature and social change, and particularly to portray the role of mother figures in Iranian women’s struggle to gain their rights as autonomous independent agents. This resonates with Walker’s outlook in her womanist ideology, as she emphasises that the experiences of women as mothers and daughters need to be portrayed and studied in the context of their own culture in order to effect any constructive changes. As Walker’s narratives bring women of colour’s experiences to the centre of her womanist discourse, these Iranian writers’ texts provide authentic representations of the experiences of the women who are further marginalised in Iranian society.

Simin Daneshvar’s story ‘A City Like Paradise’ is one of the few Iranian works where a black servant’s life is portrayed and is the main focus of the narration. Iran, like many other countries bordering the Persian Gulf, has a legacy of slavery which goes back to the ninth century.[[157]](#footnote-157) Afro-Iranians are now a part of the multi-cultural Iranian society, mostly settled in the southern parts of Iran; however, until early-twentieth century, slavery was still legal and many black slaves were owned by affluent families as servants or concubines. Daneshvar’s story is about Mehrangiz, one of these black slaves, whose mother was abducted when a child in Africa by a slave trader and sold to an aristocratic family in Siraz. Mehrangiz was born in this family and was later given as the prize in the dowry of one of the daughters of the family, becoming a slave-nanny-concubine. Mehrangiz is raped by the daughter’s husband, beaten by the daughter herself, forced to have an abortion, and finally expelled from the household. ‘Mehrangiz, the family’s *dadeh*, or nanny’, Amy Motlagh observes in ‘Ain’t I a Woman’, ‘is a black African slave, and thus not only visibly foreign but also a [relic] of the Qajar period, when slave trading and owning were still normalized aspects of elite life’.[[158]](#footnote-158)

Daneshvar’s choice of the main character as a black woman was not merely to narrate the story of a black slave in Qajar era; rather, by defamiliarizing Mehrangiz in an Iranian household, Daneshvar is trying to represent the exploitation a woman can face in the hands of other women from a different class or race. The story narrates the memories of Ali, the son of the family, who was raised by Mehrangiz, and he is very compassionate about her, while his mother causes double suffering to her in the household. Ali’s mother calls her a ‘Mombasa nigger servant’, complaining to Ali, ‘All of you prefer this ugly creature to me. Like father, like son. I know you’ll find your way to her, too’ (‘CLP’ 73).[[159]](#footnote-159)

Although Mehrangiz is a victim of male sexual violence, the major conflict here is not between man and woman. The only major male character of the story is Ali, who is the most compassionate towards her, loves her dearly like a mother, and is present at her deathbed. Mehrangiz, separated from her mother and alienated in the middle-class Iranian society, represents the suffering lonely soul Walker portrays in her novels; however, Mehrangiz, unlike Walker’s female characters, fails to survive the suppression and her story ends with her death because she could not gain the support and guidance Walker’s heroines get from maternal figures. The much needed link between Mehrangiz and her mother, her motherland, her history, and her culture is broken. There is a bedtime story Mehrangiz repeatedly tells Ali; the story of Nur ol-Saba, the ‘negress’ of Navvab’s family in Shiraz, who was freed from slavery after she was found to be the queen of her city in Africa:

One day, sweetheart, three brand new carriages pull up in front of Mr. Navvab’s garden….these were all ministers and big shots from Nur ol-Saba’s city… When Nur ol-Saba comes, all of them bow to her… As she’s walking past to get into the carriage, the blacks bow again. They’re bowing to her so low their heads touch their knees. Now she must be the queen of her city. From that day on, sweetheart, it’s every black’s dream in Shiraz for someone to come and take them away. (‘CLP’ 57-58)

Her fantasy is of occupying a different place in the hierarchy, rather than collapsing the hierarchy. It is also the dream of going back home, to where she belongs, to the people who acknowledge her. Unfortunately, Mehrangiz’s hope of getting recognized as a free individual and becoming the queen of her life is not fulfilled, and the story of Nur ol-Saba remains an unfulfilled dream.

Daneshvar, in an interview with *Omide Farda* (Future’s Hope) magazine and in response to a question regarding her hopes and plans for Iranian women, says:

I have repeatedly asserted that for me, woman, man, and children are all units of the human family... for which I have great expectations and hopes. I hope that the human family gets free from the Pharaohs… My hope is for a world where no one tries to subjugate others regardless of gender… where no one tries to exploit others, neither physically nor emotionally… My hope is for a woman to be happy and compassionate, equal to man, not his slave, and I hope for a man who is worthy of such a woman.[[160]](#footnote-160)

Daneshvar, in writing about women’s situation in Iran, does not juxtapose male and female in her stories. Similar to Walker’s womanist narratives and her depictions of African American cultures, Daneshvar’s writings depict the lives of women and men in Iranian society questioning gender, class, and racial hierarchies, offering the reader a mirror to see the reality of Iranian society in order to reconsider all the suppressive values.

Moniru Ravanipur also uses her stories to reflect the Iranian society with all its vices and virtues. She explains in an interview that stories for her are like mirrors that reflect ‘different worlds—worlds that already exist, or worlds that could be or should be’.[[161]](#footnote-161) Ravanipur originally comes from Jofreh in southern Iran and her stories are mainly set in the region, reflecting its specific linguistic and cultural characteristics. Ravanipur’s ‘Satan’s Stones’ narrates the story of Maryam, who has left her village in the south of Iran to study medicine in the city, and when she goes back to visit her family, she finds herself accused of having lost her virginity and is forcibly examined by the women of her village, led by the old matron of the village. The old matron was in ‘eternally black clothes’, ‘always alone’, but respected, feared, and acknowledged by men and women of the village, because she had ‘devoted herself to the village, to the people’:

It went back many years to the time when tuberculosis had struck the village and a hungry black djinn had come from who knows where and was eating the flesh and blood of men. So the djinn would let the village alone, the old matron, who was fourteen years old in those days, sat before a water bowl. With an incantation that the matron before her had chanted, she saw and heard in the bowl of water that a fourteen-year-old girl must remain a virgin forever, so she did, and the black djinn turned white and harmless and stayed right there in the air of the village so he could prevent anyone from getting close to her. [[162]](#footnote-162)

The matron believes Maryam has ‘disgraced everyone’ in the city and has committed the ‘sin’, because the djinn has appeared in her dreams three times: ‘I saw that the djinn was turning black as before, then I heard it say, it is the fault of the girl who is away from here’ (‘SS’ 166). Having examined Maryam in front of all women of village and made sure she is still a virgin, the matron kisses Maryam, who is lying motionless, and says: ‘Doctor, you make your mother proud, you bring pride to your village’ (‘SS’ 167).

The fact that Ravanipur has not included any male characters in her narration suggests the importance of women’s role in what Maryam experiences. Man vs. woman is not the issue in this novel; here the relationships between women (mothers and daughters and female elders of the community), the matter of female folly, and the transition of this folly from generation to generation are put on trial. In Iranian culture, mothers tell their daughters that they should comply with traditions, they should be a virgin before the marriage, and they should abide by the expectations of the elders to make sure they have remained virgin so that they are valuable to their families, their future husbands, and their people. Ravanipur here breaks with two tenets of Iranian culture: first, that the traditions are the source of knowledge that is to be revered and, second, that mothers and elders always have their daughters’ best interest at heart.

Female virginity, in most religions and traditions, is considered an unquestionable requirement for a good marriage, and circumcision is operated in some African and Arab societies in order to ensure women are intact until they get married. The maintenance of female virginity is related to patriarchal notions of control and ownership of women, and it is women’s internalization of patriarchal values that has contributed to preserving the oppressive patterns. In Iran, women are usually warned by their mothers from a very young age not to lose their virginity, and the main argument is that premarital sex brings shame on a woman and her family and will ruin her life. ‘To this date’, Kamran Talattof argues, ‘the official talk or “presentation” of sexuality is aimed at the creation of fear of jeopardizing virginity. If a girl lost her virginity before marriage, she would gain a bad name, be denied a union with a desirable husband, and imperil her future life’.[[163]](#footnote-163) The significance attached to female virginity even in modern Iranian society is highlighted by the fact that many Iranian women who choose to have premarital sexual activity usually seek hymenoplasty to restore their virginity. It can be argued that undergoing such operations affirms the patriarchal values reinforcing gender subjugation; however, as Fataneh Farahani suggests, the increase of such operations might help render it impossible to differentiate between ‘the real virgin’ and the ‘remade virgin’, casting a shadow on the whole concept of virginity and its significance.[[164]](#footnote-164)

In ‘Satan’s Stones’, mothers and maternal figures act as an extension of patriarchal patterns, enforcing the importance of virginity on their daughters. In most of her works, Ravanipur deals with ‘the complex subjects of tradition and modernity, juxtaposing elements of both, and exposing them in all their contradictions’.[[165]](#footnote-165) Ravanipur defines modernity as ‘breathing without fear, walking on the street, dancing, singing, living your life without shame, without feeling guilty, respecting human rights, having the right to choose your own path, having your own dream without any fear, having access to any information directly’.[[166]](#footnote-166) She later adds that ‘defenders of modernity are mostly women, although the barristers of tradition could be from either gender’.[[167]](#footnote-167) In ‘Sang-haye Sheytan’, Maryam represents a liberated modern woman, who seeks to establish her authority via education, while the women of her village act as defenders of the patriarchal tradition, trying to define and confine Maryam according to oppressive values. In the end of the story, ‘Maryam could hear nothing but the sound of the wind that had been ricocheting between the Satan’s stones’ (‘SS’ 167). However, it is the story of Maryam and the cruel examination she had to go through that speaks for her and many other women who are trapped in confining patriarchal beliefs. As Ravanipur asserts in an interview, ‘stories are written to show reality in a different light. Maybe they want to be written so that the story itself is not forgotten, to de-familiarize our everyday love and sufferings and passions. When a story is written, change occurs from the first sentence’.[[168]](#footnote-168)

1. **Conclusion**

Walker, as an author and an activist, has revealed through her writings black women’s struggle with dominant socio-cultural discourses that have led to their marginalization. Her theory of matrilineage in *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens* emphasizes the role of maternal legacy in women’s survival, and although she reveals the ways in which women have acted as an extension of patriarchy and have passed on the legacy of suppression to their daughters, she suggests that it is possible for women to get empowered and survive through the legacies of knowledge and creativity received from maternal figures. Similarly, Daneshvar and Ravanipur have portrayed the significance of maternal legacy in women’s suppression and survival in their narratives. Tashi in *Possessing the Secret of Joy* reveals that she has always had the tendency to escape from reality to the realm of storytelling, but not in order to forget reality; rather in order to be able to guess that something ‘out of the ordinary’ had happened to her. Raising the question of whether the story is only a ‘mask’ for the truth, she explains, ‘if I find myself way off into an improbable tale, imagining it or telling it, then I can guess something horrible has happened to me’ (*PSJ* 124). Having turned the real life experiences of women from under-represented communities into stories, Walker, Daneshvar, and Ravanipur explore and challenge the socio-cultural issues that have led to women’s subjugation and provide the space for the stories of mothers and daughters to be heard in the hope of raising society’s awareness of the value of women’s humanity and ultimately bringing about meaningful and constructive changes in women’s lives and society.

**Chapter 3**

**Autobiographies of Exile: Re-writing Motherhood/land in the Works of Jamaica Kincaid and Goli Taraghi**

I never had the approval of the world I came from, so now I don't know where I am. I've exiled myself yet again.

Jamaica Kincaid[[169]](#footnote-169)

1. **Introduction**

In the previous chapter, I explored Walker’s womanist texts and discussed how Iranian women writers’ narrations of matrilineage and mother-daughter relationships have tackled patriarchal values and contributed to Iranian women’s struggle for equity. I will continue my comparative study of Persian and English works by exploring the issues of exile and motherland. This chapter will examine the autobiographically based works of Jamaica Kincaid and Goli Taraghi, focusing on the role of autobiographical narratives in the writers’ attempt to come to terms with the traumatic experiences of their lives in the past. The depictions of mother-daughter relationships and the representations of motherland in the writers’ works might differ, but what connects them is their use of memory in their narratives of exile.

Here, exile is both literal and figurative: the home is mother/land, which is expected to be the source of love and support; hence, the writer/narrators’ distance from this source is their exile. The exile shapes their autobiographical writings, as they reflect on their lives in their homeland and ponder their relationship with their mother/lands. The exile is someone ‘without the opportunity of dialogue’, someone who ‘lacks speech’, as David Williams asserts,[[170]](#footnote-170) so writing provides these authors with the chance to communicate their state of displacement and separation and find an alternative out of the experience of exile. The driving force of Kincaid’s narrative is her relationship with her all-powerful mother, which is also signified in the relationship between Antigua and the colonizing mother country. To write about her childhood in Antigua gives Kincaid the chance to re-write and comprehend the trauma she had to experience as a young girl. For Goli Taraghi, the trauma is the product of her exile from her motherland and separation from her family, and her autobiographical writings after her traumatic experience provide her with the means of survival and help her to re-claim her authority and identity. As Hans-Georg Gadamer observes, ‘there can be no doubt that the great horizon of the past, out of which our culture and our present live, influences us in everything we want, hope for, or fear in the future. History is only present to us in light of our futurity’.[[171]](#footnote-171) Kincaid and Taraghi’s narratives are their means of grasping and comprehending the past in order to survive and make the future possible.

The significance of autobiographical narrations, which bring together ‘self’, ‘life’, and ‘writing’, lies in their roles in the construction of notions of selfhood and identity. [[172]](#footnote-172) This study will mainly focus on Kincaid’s collection of short stories *At the Bottom of the River* (1983) and *The Autobiography of My Mother* (1996) and Taraghi’s collections of short stories *Khaterat-e Parakandeh* (1992), translated as *A Mansion in the Sky* (2003), and *Do Donya* (2002), analysing the narratives of physical/emotional separation from mother/land as a state of exile, and arguing that while exile is the cause of the trauma, its narration provides the writers and narrators with the space they need in order to reinvent an autonomous identity.

* 1. **Jamaica Kincaid**

Born in 1949 and raised as Elaine Potter Richardson in St. John’s, Antigua, and educated in the British colonial education system, Jamaica Kincaid started writing after she emigrated to the U.S. She adopted a new name, which served as both a disguise and creation of a self via which she could tell her story: ‘It was a kind of invention: I wouldn’t go home to visit that part of the world, so I decided to recreate it. “Jamaica” was symbolic of that place’.[[173]](#footnote-173) She has emphasised the autobiographical essence of her writing and has spoken about her Caribbean life and upbringing in several interviews. For Kincaid, writing is the means of her struggle in finding freedom from both personal and political restraints: ‘[F]or me, writing is like going to a psychiatrist. I just discover things about myself’.[[174]](#footnote-174) Writing for Kincaid is an act of discovery and her writing is mostly based on personal memories, particularly on her childhood experience, replete with a maternal figure and imageries from the island environment she grew up in: ‘The fertile soil of my creative life is my mother’.[[175]](#footnote-175)

Her mother was an authoritative woman who taught her reading at the age of three and gave her a *Concise Oxford Dictionary* at the age of seven. English was the colonial language, and although her mother’s choice of book could be interpreted merely as enhancing her daughter’s literacy, it also represents her contribution to the colonizer’s ‘Englishing’ of the Caribbean self. Although Kincaid was the centre of her mother’s attention until she was a teenager, things changed after her brothers were born. Her mother burnt all of her books at the age of 15 when Jamaica neglected her baby brother due to obsessive reading.[[176]](#footnote-176) Kincaid reflects on this event in *My Brother* (1997): ‘It would not be so strange if I spent the rest of my life trying to bring those books back to my life by writing them again and again until they were perfect, unscathed by fire of any kind… The source of the books has not died, it only comes alive again and again in different forms and other segments’.[[177]](#footnote-177) Her education was also interrupted by the birth of her brothers: ‘My brothers were going to be gentlemen of achievement, one was going to be Prime Minister, one a doctor, one a Minister, things like that. I never heard anybody say that I was going to be anything except maybe a nurse. There was no huge future for me, nothing planned’.[[178]](#footnote-178) Although she was sent to the US at the age of sixteen to work and support her family, she broke off all contact with them, went back to school, changed her name, and started her life afresh as a writer.

Although her narratives are strongly feminist and anti-hegemonic, Kincaid refuses to be categorised as a feminist or to be considered as a black writer. She states, ‘I think I owe a lot of my success, or whatever, to this idea of feminism, but I don’t really want to be placed in that category… I always see myself as alone. I can’t bear to be in a group of any kind, or in the school of anything’. [[179]](#footnote-179) Kincaid has acknowledged that feminism has affected her life rather than her writing, and that she writes just as a ‘ruthless’ writer and not as ‘a feminist or a black person or a woman or anything’.[[180]](#footnote-180) Her characters resist subjugation and categorization due to the context and the background of her writing, and not because she wants to offer a feminist or post-colonial narration. As Sabrina Brancato argues, ‘If the protagonists of her fiction are Black and female, it is because her source is mostly autobiographical; but race and gender are always taken for granted rather than being worn like badges of honour’.[[181]](#footnote-181) Despite Kincaid’s refusal to be categorised as a black or feminist writer, her writings have hugely contributed to feminist and Caribbean literature. The source of her writings is her personal life and her memories of her relationship with her mother and her country, hence colonial and sexual hegemonies, which are inseparable parts of her past, are represented in her works, too.

Memory is the principal element in Kincaid’s narratives. Although her works are fiction and not purely autobiographical, there are traces of her real-life experiences in every single work she writes. Through productively ‘rewriting and revising of memory’ and narrating ‘the repressed, the unpleasant and the inferior or subordinated’, traumatic experiences can transform into narratives of success and survival.[[182]](#footnote-182) As Kincaid looks back and remembers the weak and vulnerable girl she left back at home, she identifies with her and tries to rewrite and understand what happened: ‘I am someone who had to make sense out of my past, I had to write or I would have died’.[[183]](#footnote-183) Kincaid’s writings of her past represent her efforts in questioning the exile her mother imposed on her in both literal and figurative senses. Her mother not only expelled the little girl from her maternal love, she also sent her away from her motherland to an exile in the US where she has stayed since. This double sense of expulsion was the core around which Kincaid’s whole life revolved and which her writings have been focused on since.

The central image in Kincaid’s memories is her mother, and her depictions of characters’ relationship with their mothers reflect her own problems with attachment and autonomy in her intense bond with her mother. The relationship between the powerful mother and the powerless daughter is a recurring theme in most of her works. There is also a political reading of this power relationship, which discovers the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized:

I’ve worked through the relationship of the mother and the girl to a relationship between Europe and the place that I’m from, which is to say, a relationship between the powerful and the powerless. The girl is powerless and the mother is powerful. The mother shows her how to be in the world, but at the back of her mind she thinks she never will get it. She’s deeply skeptical that this child could ever grow up to be a self-possessed woman and in the end she reveals her skepticism; yet even within the skepticism is, of course, dismissal and scorn. So it’s not unlike the relationship between the conquered and the conqueror.[[184]](#footnote-184)

Set in the Caribbean, Kincaid’s narrative explores the relation of race, class, and gender. While she examines the complex relationship of daughters to mothers and their passage from union to separation, she also offers a parallel reading of the tension between the colony and its mother country. I will later explore these two analogous interpretations of Kincaid’s writing and elaborate on Kincaid’s depiction of mother-daughter relationships and the concept of the motherland.

Memories help Kincaid to come to an understanding of her present self, while writing of those memories is her only means to come to terms with her past. As Linda Lang-Peralta observes, ‘There is no way to right the wrongs, but she can write about the wrongs. The multiple perspective that she has gained from this history, along with the irritation that it generates in her, inspires her productivity, leading her repeatedly to construct selves in writing’.[[185]](#footnote-185)

* 1. **Goli Taraghi**

The other writer to be addressed in this chapter, Goli Taraghi, was born and named Zohreh Taraghi-Moghadam in 1939 and raised in Tehran. She attended Firouzkouh high school in Tehran; however, she went to the United States in 1954 and finished high school there. She continued her studies in philosophy and received an undergraduate degree in 1960 from Drake University. After she returned to Iran, she obtained a master’s degree in philosophy from Tehran University where she later taught courses in philosophy, mythology and symbolism. Taraghi’s first published work was a 1969 collection of short stories entitled *Man Ham Che Guevera Hastam* (I Too Am Che Guevera), but what introduced her to a broader Iranian readership was her 1973 novel Khab-e Zemestani (Winter Sleep). Her novel focuses on the effects of modernization and westernization in the Iranian society of the 1960s, portraying the lives of eight middle-class city-dwellers and their psychological disorientation in a modernizing society.

The Islamic revolution of 1979 and the following Iran-Iraq war changed the writer’s life, leading her to move to Paris with her two children after getting divorced from her husband. Having been separated from home and family, devastated and uncertain about the future of her homeland and her family, and exposed to the solitary world of exile, Taraghi experienced a nervous breakdown and had to seek professional help:

I was naïve enough to think that the chaotic upheaval of the beginning would settle into normal life, and I could return. The increased hostility of the government toward the intellectuals and the war with Iraq, which lasted eight years, forced me to stay longer than I had imagined… fear of an uncertain future, financial worries, being lost and homesick and many other problems, conscious and unconscious, all contributed to my nervous breakdown. I believed I could fight back personally. I underestimated the destructive force of the enemy. After a year of suffering, I was finally hospitalized in a psychiatric clinic.[[186]](#footnote-186)

Considering her traumatic experience of alienation at the beginning of her expatriate life, a brief discussion of Taraghi’s family background and her life in the pre-revolution-war Iran can be enlightening. Her father, an attorney at the Ministry of Justice, belonged to a family of Muslim clergymen in Qom, the centre of Shi’te orthodoxy in Iran; however, under the influence of the accelerating movement towards modernization, he changed his family name to Taraghi, meaning ‘progress’, married the daughter of a family of artists in Tehran, and founded two journals dedicated to supporting the cause of modernization. Having been brought up in such a diverse environment and educated in Iran and abroad, Taraghi came to appreciate the beauty of the Persian traditions as well as the modern elements of her life. Her passion for Persian literature, combined with her talent for writing, and assisted by her knowledge of mythology and symbolism, were the sources of her literary creations.

The turn Taraghi’s life and career took when she left Iran for Paris and her struggle with this self-imposed exile resulted in the creation of her next published work, a 1992 collection of short stories titled *Khaateraat-e Paraakandeh* (Scattered Memories), which was later published in English translation and titled *A Mansion in the Sky and Other Short Stories* (2003). Taraghi later published a sequel to this collection titled *Do Donya* in 2002, featuring seven short stories, drawing on her personal life and experience in Iran and abroad: ‘Do Donya (two worlds) means the two dimensions of life: birth and death, the truth and lie, a safe home in Shemiran [northern Tehran] opposite the chaotic world of outdoors, the sweet and innocent world of childhood and the world of the two-faced grown-ups’.[[187]](#footnote-187)

1. **Memory and Autobiography**

Autobiographical works have never been as popular as in the late twentieth-century when, as Leigh Gilmore observes, autobiography became ‘*the* genre’ representing the popularity of ‘the therapy-driven “culture of confession”’ on the one hand and ‘the historical description of autobiography as a Western mode of self-production, a discourse… which features a rational and representative ‘I’ at its center’.[[188]](#footnote-188) Autobiographical writing gives the narrators the opportunity to narrate the story of their lives and to self-represent and reclaim the ‘I’. The writers of autobiographical narrations are removed from their past by time and, usually, place, and memory is their only means of transferring those experiences of the past to the present. Since these retrospective narrations are about the past and sometimes of childhood, there might arise certain ambiguities and complexities. Kate Douglas argues that for an adult writing an autobiography, childhood memories are ‘at best fragile and fragmented and at worst impossible to retrieve’, and she further remarks that autobiographies are ‘laden with memory loss, memory gaps, false memory, and a plethora of other memory-related controversies. Autobiography is a genre weighed down by public suspicion, and memory, along with truth, remains a key stake in authorizing autobiographies of childhood’.[[189]](#footnote-189) The autobiographical narratives discussed in this chapter are replete with memories of childhood, and the two writers constantly look back and write about the past and their relationships with their mothers that have shaped their present lives. Nevertheless, this study will not discuss the credibility of the memories in charge of creating these autobiographies. The focus of the study is on the role of autobiographical writing in the writers’ quest for survival of the self in face of the physical and emotional detachment from the mother/land. I, like Lambek and Antze, consider memory as a ‘practice, not as a pregiven object of our gaze but as the act of gazing and the object it generates. Memories are produced out of experience and, in turn, reshape it’.[[190]](#footnote-190)

Through her autobiographical writing, Kincaid reflects upon her childhood vulnerability and powerlessness, reproduces those childhood memories, and provides the child with an opportunity to defend herself by speaking of her and on her behalf. The nurturing and oppressive maternal power works at both personal and colonial levels in Kincaid. The trauma related to the mother-daughter relationship is perplexing but represents the clash between a controlling, powerful mother who refuses to acknowledge her daughter’s independence and an angry girl who tries to make sense of the harsh and brutal attitude of her mother who was once so caring and protective, but has now expelled her not only from her maternal love but also from her homeland. Kincaid’s realization of the imperial power of mother Britain over colonial Antigua at a young age effected complex emotions of rage and dismay in her similar to the traumatic experience of her relationship with her mother. As the child’s tendency to maturation and separation from the mother to be an autonomous figure results in the transformation of a loving mother to a controlling one, the will of the colonized people to break free from oppression is not tolerated by the colonizer. Kincaid uses fiction to address the individual pain of the little girl and to address the issue of colonialism and offer commentary on the complex relation between race and gender in a colonial context.

What makes Kincaid’s work intelligible as autobiography are the reappearing characters of the oppressive mother and the oppressed child in almost all her works and her obsession with this twofold maternal love. She writes of the loving yet authoritative mother in *My Brother* (1997) :

It has never occurred to her that her way of loving us might not be the best thing for us… Her love for her children when they are children is spectacular, unequalled I am sure in the history of a mother’s love. It is when her children are trying to be grown-up people – adults – that her mechanism for loving falls apart; it is when they are living in a cold apartment in New York, hungry and penniless because they have decided to be a writer, writing to her, seeking sympathy, a word of encouragement, love that her mechanism for loving falls apart. Her reply to one of her children who found herself in such a predicament was ‘It serves you right, you are always trying to do things you know you can’t do’. [[191]](#footnote-191)

Kincaid’s mother is the loving and life-threatening force of her writing. The absence of the maternal love and support and separation from the motherland created a traumatic state of exile for Kincaid which could only be understood and resolved through writing about it. As Kincaid notes, narration for her is an act of self-mothering and reinstatement of self after mother/land separation: ‘When I was young, younger than I am now, I started to write about my own life and I came to see that this act saved my life’.[[192]](#footnote-192)

Goli Taraghi is another writer whose writing has acted as the means of her survival in exile. Her early works largely focused on the dilemmas individuals face in the rapidly modernizing Iranian society. However, when the Iran-Iraq war started after the Islamic revolution and Taraghi moved to France with her children, she was faced with dilemmas of her own. Separated from her family and homeland, and haunted by uncertainty about the future of her children, Taraghi went through a period of severe depression and was hospitalized. When she was later healed and started writing again, her work was transformed, taking on a more autobiographical nature.

Taraghi has remarked in her interviews that the stories of the two aforementioned collections are not completely autobiographical, but similar to Kincaid, her family members and her childhood memories and experiences are reflected in these stories: ‘I am not one of those writers who invent their stories solely using their imagination. I need to have experienced my stories, only if to a very small degree. Some of my stories are all real, from A to Z… and some are woven around real characters or incidents’.[[193]](#footnote-193) This ‘need’ for experiencing one’s story in order to narrate it reflects Paul John Eakin’s view of narrative, in which he does not consider it as ‘merely a literary form’, rather as a mode of ‘self-experience’. As Eakin observes, in autobiographical writings, ‘narrative and identity are so intimately linked that each constantly and properly gravitates into the conceptual field of the other’, hence self and story are ‘complementary, mutually constituting aspects of a single process of identity formation’.[[194]](#footnote-194) For Taraghi, past experiences and memories become the content of the narratives, through which she sustains her sense of identity. Nonetheless, her writings are not completely autobiographical, and while ‘The First Day’ and ‘The Last Day’ reflect her experience at the psychiatric clinic, in a few other stories she has only used the real setting and her family members as models for the fictional characters:

I write fiction and fiction is a mixture of reality and imagination. I have repeatedly remarked this in my interviews that *Do Donya* and the stories that are linked to my childhood and adolescence (in *Khaterat-e Parakandeh*) are not exact narrations of reality and one should not consider them as my biography. It is correct that I have used my family members – aunts, uncles, and my parents – to create fictional characters, and Tehran of the old times is the setting of my stories. Nonetheless, these stories are fiction more than anything else. They are not just memoirs. My father is a character of the story, partly real and partly fictional, a product of my mind.[[195]](#footnote-195)

Just as writing for Kincaid started as an act of survival, Taraghi resumed writing in order to liberate herself from her trauma: ‘Taking the right medication restored my mental stability and helped me to overcome my dreadful anxieties, but what came to my rescue and pulled me out of the dark well of depression was the magical force of literature’.[[196]](#footnote-196)

The mixture of fact and fiction in Kincaid and Taraghi’s writings is not the only feature that links their writings; an important aspect of their narratives is the centrality of a state of exile, which seems to be the source of the trauma they experience at different stages in their lives. This exile is both literal and figurative: at one level, it represents the emotional detachment from or hatred towards the mother who fails to provide the maternal support/love the child expects; at another level, it is the separation from the motherland that leaves the writer/narrator with the void in which she searches for a lost identity. Their exile is exemplified not only by their separation from their homeland, but also by the critical distance from their social/cultural beliefs. According to both Qur’anic[[197]](#footnote-197) and Biblical[[198]](#footnote-198) texts, human beings’ earthly life is in fact an exile, since Adam and Eve were expelled from Eden, hence, it can be argued that the hope and desire to return to home is an instinct for all. The first exile was also not just about the distance from the homeland, but also about thinking differently and being non-conformist. This non-conformity provides the essential space for a creative spirit. One can experience an outcast/exile life inside and outside one’s homeland; however, the distance from the motherland gave both Kincaid and Taraghi an outsider’s vision and offered them the opportunity to search for the meaning of the home and the self in their writings.

The existence of an exile in the writers’ works is characterized by the repetition of the experience of their exile in their stories. Their works are nostalgic yearnings for authenticity as both writers and women. Their nostalgia involves the mourning for identities that they either never had or at some point in their lives lost. Nostalgia comes from the Greek consisting of ‘nostos’ for homecoming or the desire to return home and ‘algia’ for ache or painful longing.; hence, nostalgia is characterized by the complex relation between ‘repetition, exile and desire’.[[199]](#footnote-199) As an émigré’s life moves forward in exile, it is replete with looking back and longing for what is left behind. Exile is ‘the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home’, and it is difficult, if not impossible, to overcome the ‘essential sadness’ of exile.[[200]](#footnote-200) This explains both Taraghi and Kincaid’s obsession with their pre-exile life in their writings. Their writings represent their tendency to reflect on what happened before the critical separation and offers them the means to explore different aspects of their exile. Nonetheless, they both offer a sort of an end to this obsession in the last story of their collections, where they seem to have found and embraced their identities in exile: they re-invent a new self in a new home.

1. **Kincaid’s Mother/Motherland Metaphor**

Writing is a highly personal act for Kincaid; it is an act of self-invention. While Kincaid’s writing style is simple, evocative, and sensitive, she captures complex emotions and reveals disruptive issues in her works. Through writing, Kincaid tries to discover the secret of herself, because for her ‘everything passes through the self’,[[201]](#footnote-201) and it is impossible to do so without looking back, analysing, and trying to make sense of her and her country’s past, dominated by the troubled relationship with a powerful, abusive mother. Her writings demonstrate an obsession with her childhood experiences, and as memories of trauma surface in her works, she does not stop, until some degree of closure is achieved.[[202]](#footnote-202) Her autobiographical writings mark her attempt in surviving the trauma, giving her the authorial power to construct her sense of identity and to write back to the mother, who had confined and consigned her to disgrace, failure, and depression. ‘Girl’ and ‘Antigua Crossings’, both published for the first time in June 1978, are heavily autobiographical, although Kincaid has managed to obscure the references to the incidents from her own life. ‘Antigua Crossings’ depicts the relationship between a domineering mother and ‘an overly troublesome’ twelve-year-old daughter, who is sent away from her family because of her bad behaviour. Kincaid herself was sent to her grandmother’s house in Dominica during her childhood to be relieved from a magic spell her mother believed had been cast upon her.[[203]](#footnote-203) Victoria, the mother in ‘Antigua Crossings’, continuously accuses her daughter, Mignonette, of lying and stealing, and when sending her away to her grandparents’, Victoria tells her how to act and to avoid bringing shame on the family: ‘She said that I was to try hard and not bring shame on her and my father. I said the appropriate “Yes Mamie, No Mamie, Yes Mamie.”’[[204]](#footnote-204) The fact that the mother persona is named Victoria suggests Kincaid’s view of the controlling mother as the colonial power and echoes the parallel she draws in her other works between mother-daughter relationships and colonizer-colonized patterns. ‘Antigua Crossings’ very much reflects Kincaid’s troubled relationship with her mother, the constant rebuke and humiliation she experienced at her mother’s hands, and her forced emigration to the U.S.

‘Girl’, also published as the first story in *At the Bottom of the River* (1983), narrates another troubled mother-daughter relationship. Kincaid has remarked that in ‘Girl’, she has ‘exactly’ captured her mother’s voice,[[205]](#footnote-205) which is the angry, contemptuous voice of a discontented mother. Like ‘Antigua Crossings’, the mother in ‘Girl’ tells her daughter how to be a good and responsible daughter and follow the society’s norms so that she does not bring shame on her family. The mother starts with motherly advice on how to do this or that and what to do or not: ‘don’t walk barehead in the hot sun; cook pumpkin fritters in very hot sweet oil’ (*River* 3).[[206]](#footnote-206) However, her words change later into harsh orders and lead to humiliation and accusation of the daughter of ‘sluttish’ behaviour: ‘on Sundays try to walk like a lady and not like the slut you are so bent on becoming… this is how to behave in the presence of men who don’t know you very well, and this way they won’t recognize immediately the slut I have warned you against becoming’ (*River* 3-4). Throughout the whole story, the daughter is just listening to her mother’s accusations and assaults and when she dares to interrupt her mother to offer any explanations, she is met only with more insults from her mother. Kincaid, in picturing the mother’s assertive language and domineering attitude, reflects her own mother’s behaviour, which Kincaid calls ‘just astonishing, and harsh – very cruel and very painful’.[[207]](#footnote-207) Furthermore, this gives the humiliated little girl in Kincaid the chance to verbalize the pain and shame her mother forced upon her and to condemn her mother’s rejecting, abusive behaviour.

‘Girl’ and other stories in *At the Bottom of the River* explore more than Kincaid’s obsession with controlling and protective maternal power: they also offer insight into the internalised sexism and racism of the Antiguan community. Sabrina Brancato observes:

In Kincaid’s work the mother/motherland metaphor is played out at two levels. At one level, the nurturing and loving mother of childhood may represent the African-rooted Caribbean world, a world made of beauty and innocence where Kincaid’s dramatis persona feels protected and happy. At the other level, in striking resemblance to Mother England, when the daughter starts to show signs of autonomy, the mother abandons praise and approval for scorn and begins a violent struggle to keep the daughter under her subjection. (24)

When the mother, in ‘Girl’, suspects that her daughter has been singing ‘benna’ (folk songs) in Sunday school at church, it is in fact the colonial discourse that is condemning the demonstration of native and ‘primitive’ culture. Kincaid recounts the sense of alienation she felt in her homeland even when she was only a child: ‘When I was nine, I refused to stand up at the refrain of ‘God save our King’. I hated ‘Rule, Britannia’; and I used to say that we weren’t Britons, we were slaves’.[[208]](#footnote-208) ‘Wingless’ is another story that reflects the racist logic of the western educational system under which colonial children need to learn things that are irrelevant to their life and culture: ‘The children have already learned to write their names in beautiful penmanship. They have already learned how many farthings make a penny, how many pennies make a shilling, how many shillings make a pound’ (*River* 21). To add insult to injury, children are also taught to consider themselves as inferior, hence they internalize self-loathing. There is a passage where the girl has a conversation with her teacher and the teacher tells her ‘You should see how you look trying to remove all the strings from the bananas with your monkey fingernails’ (*River* 24). To associate the little girl with a monkey and make her feel insignificant is part of the hegemonic colonial standard according to which people of colour belong to a lower sect of the mankind. The effects of such a colonial education are reflected in Kincaid’s narration of her own experience at school:

When my teacher showed us the map, she asked us to study it carefully, because no test we would ever take would be complete without this statement: ‘Draw a map of England’...I did not know then that this statement was part of a process that would result in my erasure – not my physical erasure, but my erasure all the same. I did not know then that this statement was meant to make me feel awe and small whenever I heard the word ‘England’: awe at the power of its existence, small because I was not from it’.[[209]](#footnote-209)

This feeling of powerlessness is well presented in another story in the collection, ‘Holidays’, where the female character tries to gain a sense of her identity which is burdened by colonialism: ‘I try to write my name in the dead ashes with my big toe. I cannot write my name in the dead ashes with my toe. My big toe, now dirty, I try to clean by rubbing it vigorously on a clean royal-blue rug. The royal-blue rug now has a dark spot, and my big toe has a strong burning sensation’ (*River* 30). Her name is taken from her by the colonizer, who has violated the land and the people, inflicting feelings of loss and profound anger. As Kincaid’s toe stains the ‘royal-blue rug’, Antigua’s colonization leaves a dirty mark in the history of British colonialism.

In colonial societies, women are doubly exploited due to the sexism inherent in such a context. Laura Niesen De Abruna observes that in Antigua ‘there was much cultural violence directed toward women based on popular attitudes toward their sexuality and their bodies… Such attitudes spread through the educational system and were widely adopted, sometimes even by the women who were denigrated by these ideologies’.[[210]](#footnote-210) In ‘Girl’, the mother’s advice on domestic affairs such as washing ‘the white clothes on Monday’ or hemming a dress implies the fact that the daughter has no other choice than performing domestic activities. The class and gender prejudices forced upon women as social norms are reflected in the mother’s advice of ‘try to walk like a lady’. Also, the mother repeatedly warns the daughter against behaving like a ‘slut’ in front of men and not causing any trouble. Such a maternal discourse, Sabrina Brancato observes, ‘expresses the mother’s awareness of the historical sexual abuse of women in general and Black women in particular and the fear that her daughter will become one of the victims’.[[211]](#footnote-211) The mother’s attitude, in teaching her how to avoid behaving like the ‘slut’ she is ‘so bent on becoming’, reflects the troubling dilemma Patricia Hill Collins believes black mothers often face:

Black daughters must learn how to survive in interlocking structures of race, class and gender oppression while rejecting and transcending those same structures… [Mothers] also know that if their daughters uncritically accept the limited opportunities offered Black women, they become willing participants in their own subordination. Mothers may have ensured their daughters’ physical survival, but at the high cost of their emotional destruction.[[212]](#footnote-212)

The mother’s voice in ‘Girl’ becomes extremely threatening when the narrative enters the colonial context, highlighting the effects of colonialism on the native culture and the mother’s efforts in teaching her daughter how to survive in this context. The mother is trying to teach her daughter how to be a strong woman and stand up for herself in the face of injustice; however, this happens only at the cost of the daughter’s internalization of feelings of shame, misery, and hatred.

Kincaid’s clear storyline, her everyday language, and the realistic world in ‘Girl’ is not followed in other stories in *At the Bottom of the River*, although most of the stories share the mother-daughter relationship as the focus of her narrative. ‘At Last’ is a story divided into two parts, ‘The House’ and ‘The Yard’, and constitutes a dialogue between a mother and her daughter through which Kincaid recalls some of the stories told by her own mother. The stories the mother narrates in ‘At Last’ are all about the daughter, and although her stories are about their union when the daughter was so young she does not remember, there are accusations hidden at the heart of the stories that tell the daughter how bad and troublesome she was: ‘I sat in this rocking chair with you on my lap. Let me calm her I thought, let me calm her. But in my breast my milk soured… You wore your clothes wrapped tight around your body, keeping your warmth to yourself. What greed’! (*River* 16) The love expressed in the mother’s words is sometimes caring and reassuring and sometimes selfish and cruel. Sometimes the voices become one and unrecognizable and it is hard to distinguish whether it is the mother trying to explain why their union was broken or the girl complaining about the negligence and uncaring behaviour of her mother: ‘What passed between us then? You asked me if it was always the way it is now. But I don’t know…. We held hands once and were beautiful. But what followed? Sleepless nights… A baby was born on Thursday and was almost eaten, eyes first, by red ants, on Friday’[[213]](#footnote-213) (*River* 14). This passage is a fictional construction of what Kincaid experienced as a child when suddenly the safe environment of the home changed into a dangerous and brutal one and her loving mother transformed into a cruel, powerful woman. The birth of her brother marks the beginning of her miseries and the haunting memory of the battalion of red ants signifies the horror she experienced when faced with this clash in her relationship with her mother.

The love-hate mother-daughter relationship is the theme of ‘My Mother’, another story in the collection. The story begins with the daughter wishing her mother dead and immediately, after she sees her mother’s despair, begging for forgiveness. She is forgiven, but her mother takes revenge: ‘Placing her arms around me, she drew my head closer and closer to her bosom, until finally I suffocated’ (*River* 53). The conflict between them intensifies as the girl grows up and enters adolescence: the mother is caring toward her children, but when they claim power and independence, she shows them how cruel and powerful she can be. The girl’s child-like love toward her mother and her mother’s love for her defenceless child is well represented in this passage: ‘I fit perfectly in the crook of my mother’s arm, on the curve of her back, in the hollow of her stomach. We eat from the same bowl, drink from the same cup; when we sleep, our heads rest on the same pillow. As we walk through the rooms, we merge and separate, merge and separate’ (*River* 60). However, this does not last, as the girl separates and lives far from home in search for her identity. Her mother shows her contempt for her daughter’s independence and affirms her superiority when they meet again after some time: ‘What a strange expression you have on your face. So cross, so miserable, as if you were living in a climate not suited to your nature’ (*River* 57). The daughter also acknowledges that however mature and powerful she gets, her mother will always remain the all-powerful: ‘My mother has grown to an enormous height. I have grown to an enormous height also, but my mother’s height is three times mine. Sometimes I cannot see from her breasts on up, so lost is she in the atmosphere’ (*River* 58). Although the girl feels the need to release herself from reliance upon the mother she dearly loves, when she does not receive the love she expects from her mother, she feels like an exile. Banished and hurt, the girl expresses her exile in the words ‘she [the mother] shook me out and stood me under a tree’ (*River* 53).

This sense of rage and hatred for an all-powerful maternal presence from whose motherly love she is expelled is also what drives the daughter in ‘Blackness’, another story in the collection, to a state ‘beyond despair or the spiritual vacuum’ embracing ‘time as it passes in numbing sameness, bearing in its wake a multitude of great sadness’ (*River* 51). The daughter, absorbed in the darkness, has no other choice but to seek refuge in a state of erasure and annihilation in order to defy the hatred and gloom she feels toward her mother. Not only does this lead to her isolation and disconnection from others, but it also causes a complete denial of her identity: ‘I hear the silent voice – how softly now it falls, and all of existence is caught up in it. Living in the silent voice, I am no longer “I.” Living in the silent voice, I am at last at peace. Living in the silent voice, I am at last erased’ (*River* 52). Although maternal love plays a significant role in helping children develop strong and independent personalities, it can also be a threat to their identity should it become a suffocating, manipulative force.

Contrary to the girl in ‘Blackness’ who faces depression and the erasure of the self, the girl in ‘At the Bottom of the River’, the last and title story of the collection, is healed and her quest for the self is achieved through art. The flowing river symbolises the course of life and the narrator is trying to discover its meaning in a dream-world. She meets two men in the river, one evoking the image of a colonizer, living in a world ‘bereft of its nature’ and incapable of understanding the nature, and the other signifying the colonised man who can appreciate ‘the beauty in the common things…[b]ut again and again he feels the futility in all that. For stretching out before him is a silence so dreadful, a vastness, its length and breadth and depth immeasurable. Nothing’ (*River* 67-68). Nonetheless, neither of these men can offer her any meaning for life. The world seems dead to her: ‘Dead lay everything that had lived and dead also lay everything that would live’ (*River* 68). The source of this despairing awareness is no one but her mother, who had revealed to her once that ‘Death is natural’ (*River* 71). The daughter mourns the loss of her childhood when everything seemed eternal and her mother would send her ‘words of love and adoration’: ‘glorious moment upon glorious moment of contentment and joy and love running into each other and forming an extraordinary chain: a hymn sung in rounds’ (*River* 73-74). If the river symbolises the girl’s life, the bottom of the river is where she finds herself mature and powerful: she is in a world where colonialism does not exist, her rage and despair toward her mother fades, the opposites live harmoniously together, ‘the sun and the moon shone at the same time’ (*River* 77). Having transformed herself from a helpless, confused child into an independent woman, she is standing there as if she were ‘a prism, many-sided and transparent, refracting and reflecting light… light that never could be destroyed’ (*River* 80). In the absence of maternal/imperial power, her world is perfected and she is complete. Now she is ready to go back to reality, to her room where the lamp is lit and there are some books, a table, a chair, and a pen. The narrator now has a room of her own where she reclaims and re-writes her identity: ‘I claim these things then – mine – and now feel myself grow solid and complete, my name filling up my mouth’ (*River* 82). The innocent, helpless girl who started the journey in the first story of *At the Bottom of the River* in awe and shame, the girl who experienced rage and despair due to subjugation under both the mother and the colonizer, the girl who faced self-erasure and couldn’t even say ‘I’, transforms herself into a woman who can reclaim her name and identity through artistic creation in the writer’s room.

As Kincaid’s narrative reveals how her mother’s controlling presence plays a significant role in her life even after the character leaves her, the post-colonial Antigua she portrays in her works is not free from western colonialism, either. Having explored the effects of slavery and tourism on her homeland in *A Small Place* (1988), Kincaid expresses her discontent, apprehension, and fury towards the loss and destruction of post-colonial Antigua in the hands of the colonizers. She writes:

Antigua was settled by human rubbish from Europe, who used enslaved but noble and exalted human beings from Africa … to satisfy their desire for wealth and power, to feel better about their own miserable existence, so that they could be less lonely and empty – a European disease. Eventually the masters left, in a kind of way; eventually, the slaves were freed, in a kind of way. The people in Antigua now, the people who really think of themselves as Antiguans … are the descendants of those noble and exalted people, the slaves.[[214]](#footnote-214)

As Kincaid’s narrations of her exile are far from a celebration of freedom from her mother’s controlling behaviour, her narrative of Antigua is far from a simple glorification of the exalted slave. For Kincaid, her mother still has a dominating presence in her writings since she has refused to acknowledge her daughter’s authority and success. For Antigua, the exploitation continues, in another form, and European tourists perpetuate the colonization, by contributing to a system which chains Antigua’s economy to tourism. As Justin D. Edwards observes, two significant aspects of Kincaid’s writings are brought together in this work: ‘the pain that arises from exposing the truth and the personal suffering that accompanies loss. The text does this by combining truth with loss as Kincaid reveals truth by describing the exploitation and loss that lies behind the happy front of Antigua’s tourist industry’.[[215]](#footnote-215) Kincaid criticises Antiguans for contributing to this post-colonial economic slavery and believes that they are no more noble or exalted and they are ‘just human beings’, like the tourists.[[216]](#footnote-216) Just like her other works, Kincaid’s profound social critique in *A Small Place* is mixed with her childhood memories. As Kincaid’s life and her narratives are affected by her relationship with her mother/land, post-colonial Antigua’s problems stem from its colonial past, revealing how colonialism imposes historical narratives on a nation by making them internalize colonial cultural values.

For Kincaid, her memories act as the stepping stone for construction of her new self: ‘I understand that I was inventing myself […] I did not have position, I did not have money at my disposal. I had memory, I had anger, I had despair’.[[217]](#footnote-217) It is the initial absence and the creation of the mother-daughter relationship that Kincaid explores in her *The Autobiography of My Mother* (1996). As the cover page of the novel reveals, it is a mixture of fact and fiction, truth and invention; it is a novel, but it is also an autobiography, and although the novel starts with the absence of the mother, she is an essential part of the world Kincaid constructs. It opens with these words: ‘My mother died at the moment I was born, and so for my whole life there was nothing standing between myself and eternity; at my back was always a bleak, black wind’ (*Autobiography* 3).[[218]](#footnote-218) The novel’s narrator, Xuela Claudette Richardson, who is of a mixed background (African-Scottish-Caribbean), tells her story from birth until her seventies, and what unites all the episodes of her narration is the fact that she feels unloved and alone. She is an embodiment of conflicting forces and her mixed ancestral background represents the history of colonization. The novel develops from Kincaid’s troubled relationship with her mother, and explores the destructive influences of internalized colonial values and cultural forces on one’s development of identity. In this novel, the mother’s absence immerses Xuela in an abyss of loneliness she must tolerate and survive: ‘[A]t my beginning was this woman whose face I had never seen, but at my end was nothing, no one between me and the black room of the world’ (*Autobiography* 3). Overwhelmed with ‘sadness and shame and pity’ for herself, she sees herself ‘vulnerable, hard, and helpless’ (*Autobiography* 4), in a world where ‘to mistrust each other was just one of the many feelings’ people had for each other, ‘all of them the opposite of love, all of them standing in the place of love’ (*Autobiography* 48). This loveless world is a reflection of the colonial history and the patriarchal point of view which Kincaid tries to subvert and rewrite through Xuela’s narration. Kincaid explores the damaging impacts of internalized colonialism on children. The first words the four-year-old Xuela speaks are ‘Where is my father?’, not in Creole, but in standard English: ‘That the first words I said were in the language of a people I would never like or love is not now a mystery to me; everything in my life, good or bad, to which I am inextricably bound is a source of pain’ (*Autobiography* 7). Xuela learns at school to view her ancestry with shame: ‘my teacher … was of African people, that I could see, and she found in this a source of humiliation and self-loathing […] She did not love us; we did not love her; we did not love one another, not then, not ever’ (*Autobiography* 15).

Kincaid’s writings focus on the troubled notion of motherhood in a colonial context, retelling and reassessing a situation of loss and longing. Xuela’s refusal to be a mother reflects her anger towards her own mother who was absent, but it also represents her decision to mother herself. As Xuela writes at the end of the novel:

This account of my life has been an account of my mother’s life as much as it has been an account of mine, and even so, again it is an account of the life of the children I did not have, as it is their account of me. In me is the voice I never heard, the face I never saw, the being I came from. In me are the voices that should have come out of me, the faces I never allowed to form, the eyes I never allowed to see me. This account is an account of the person who was never allowed to be and an account of the person I did not allow myself to become. (*Autobiography* 227-28)

As A. W. Schultheis observes, the passage ‘celebrates the ability of the narrative itself to extend beyond the confines of existing history in the hope of altering the course of the future’.[[219]](#footnote-219) Kincaid speaks to, and for, those who have been subjugated, renegotiating the relations of the past to the present and to the future. Kincaid sets her stories against her mother; however, in *The Autobiography of My Mother*, she also writes the story of a woman who becomes her own mother, giving birth to and gaining the knowledge of her selfhood.

1. **Taraghi’s Exile and Authoring**

Exile is defined as ‘a living that embraces both the spaces of “here”, present, host county, and “there”, past, home…For exiles, return to their homeland stays a strong part of their life’.[[220]](#footnote-220) This definition of exile applies to what Taraghi experienced after she left Iran and started a new life with her children in Paris. Taraghi was not expelled from the country and her expatriate life was a choice of her own; however, the turbulent environment of Iran, attacked by Iraq while still in a state of shock after the revolution, and the uncertainty about the future of her family and her country forced Taraghi to choose to leave the country. The two short stories ‘The First Day’ and ‘The Last Day’ narrate the estrangement the writer experienced in the beginning of her expatriate life. For the narrator of the stories, the only real thing is her past, whatever shapes her present is unfamiliar and painful, and she sees her future bleak and dark. Hence, she throws herself into the past, where memories begin. Her short story ‘The First Day’ is an autobiographical piece on her experience of mental breakdown, where she looks inside and back to learn about herself and understand her present condition. She writes of when she tried to seek remedy in her recollections of her family and homeland to recreate the safe haven she lost when she left Iran and to escape the bleakness of her exile.Writing for the narrator is a psychological cure and a journey of discovery. She needs to go back to regain the energy of life and survive, so that she can look forward to the future:

There exists, in the universe of my memories, another world which is much more real and secure than my actual life in Paris. All day, unable to face the reality of present time and uncertainties of a dark future, I stay in bed and dream of summertime in Tehran, of the Friday festivities in our house, of parties and picnics, of religious ceremonies and family dinners, and of myself, a carefree happy child, playing with a multitude of cousins—boys and girls of different ages, in the green alleys of our neighbourhood. It is not a sweet remembrance of the past, but a dreadful effort to recreate a world which does not exist anymore.[[221]](#footnote-221)

As in Kincaid’s writings, Taraghi’s recreations of her childhood memories in her stories is an act of self-invention in exile, signifying the writer’s attempt to rebuild the connection with her motherland in order to reclaim and establish her authority.

In her autobiographically based fiction, largely written after the Islamic revolution in exile, Taraghi searches her memories for details about her life back in Iran and reconfigures them in intricate narrations of not only adolescence and youth in her motherland, but also the agonies of uprooting and displacement in exile. The first few stories of *Khaateraat-e Paraakandeh* are narrated from a young girl’s point of view, reflecting the conflicting feelings and obsessions of puberty, interweaving real characters and incidents from Taraghi’s life and her fictional creations. The young narrators of these stories are not necessarily the same girl; however, they all portray a concern with the agonizing uncertainties about her growing up and the upcoming changes in her life. Nonetheless, one should not assume that her stories are mere autobiographical narrations and expressions of private feelings. Although she does not offer any direct criticism of the socio-cultural issues of the patriarchal Iran of the time, her use of point of view and her narrational techniques provide the reader with the means to come to the intended conclusion. For example, ‘Father’, her narration of the father and the Shemiran house he built for the family, is replete with nostalgia and longing for the past life. The father, self-declared as the ‘steel’ that ‘never rusts’, is the pillar of the household. He has designed the house himself ‘room after room, strung one after another like wagons of a train’, and has declared a hundred times, ‘This is exactly the house I want. My very own house’ (AMITS 59).[[222]](#footnote-222) The father is a caring man who does his best in providing the family with everything they need; however, he also takes it upon himself to punish anyone who does not abide by his rules: ‘Father’s punishment is in the form of fines. Everyone in the household is on his payroll – maids, servants, Mother, my brother and I, my aunts, tutors’ (*AMITS* 60). As the Shemiran house, once ‘the axis of the life of the whole clan’, is demolished due to the construction of a major thoroughfare and the family moves to a ‘modest and sparsely furnished apartment’, the father’s will is broken and he dies ‘quietly and serenely’ (*AMITS* 71).

Taraghi’s design of the whole collection represents a pattern that signifies the gradual destruction of the ‘home’ leading to exile. The first story ‘The Shemiran Bus’ is the narration of a little girl’s friendship with a bus driver. The narrator recalls her own memories of when she was ten and how she looked forward to taking Aziz Agha’s bus back home from Firoozkuhi School. Aziz Agha has ‘puffy, bloodshot eyes’ and his hair is ‘curly and drips with hair oil’. He ‘has the look of a giant, scary enough to frighten small children. His hands and upper chest are covered with tattoos. There is a thick, bluish scar from one ear to the other side of his neck, as if somebody had tried to cut his head off’ (*AMITS* 13-14). Yet the little girl cherishes his friendship: ‘He looks at me in the mirror and makes faces, blowing up his cheeks, twitching his nose, crossing his eyes. I cover my mouth so that passengers will not hear the sound of my hearty laughter’ (*AMITS* 13-14). Aziz Agha is the epitome of all that her mother disapproves of, and the little girl takes pleasure in doing everything her mother bans:

My mother has an unnatural fear of the full moon and tells me not to stare at the stars, but I do and sometimes see a dragon glide out of the deep blue of the sky and disappear into the Milky Way […] My mother never rides the bus. She has her own car and driver because she knows there are monsters like Aziz Agha roaming the world. She is unhappy about my riding the bus to school. But this is my father’s direct order and cannot be contravened. (*Mansion* 12-14)

Aziz Agha symbolises all the mysteries and excitement of the real world the girl has been protected from by her mother till now. The mother wants her daughter to be like herself and the girl understands this: ‘My mother smells different from anything else. Hers is the smell of perfume and powder, of film stars, fashion magazines, Lalehzar Avenue, and the Municipality Dance Hall. Mother smells of future days, of tomorrow, and all the good things that are in store for me’ (*Mansion* 14). Her friendship with Aziz Agha cannot last long due to her critical illness, and she is sent away to Paris. Nonetheless, the memory of Aziz Agha and his golden tooth remains as a source of ‘comfort and reassurance’ whenever she is depressed or faces a tough situation, because they remind her of the home that does not exist for her in exile anymore.

The gradual destruction of the ties with her motherland is also represented in ‘My Little Friend’, where the narrator recalls how she loses her best friend to a new foreign girl, and how she feels betrayed by her ‘cheating, lying, disloyal friend’: ‘This is the first and the biggest fraud ever perpetrated on me’ (*Mansion* 37). When the narrator sees the foreign girl again years later, all the memories of her school, the Shemiran house, her friendship, and her lost hopes for the continuation of this relationship come back to her. She does not have any of them anymore. This feeling of abandonment and distrust is projected in her other story ‘The Maid’: ‘When the revolution came, those who worked for us simply got up and left, even Hassan Agha, the cook, who had been with us some forty odd years, and his wife, Zahra Khanum, who always swore we were the apple of her eye’. Not only does Hassan Agha disappears ‘suddenly and surreptitiously – no goodbyes, no reasons or excuses for leaving’, his sons also turn up ‘as local revolutionary-committee henchmen’ and begin sending ‘threatening messages’ and asking for ‘money – half the house, part of the garden’ (*Mansion* 73-76). With the destruction of the Shemiran house and the departure of the old cook, Taraghi writes, ‘a part of our family history was wiped out […] With him and Nanny Karaji leaving us, the Shah skipping the country, the uncle hastily migrating to far-off corners of the world, a neighbor’s house being confiscated, and Shamsolmoluk Khanum being accidentally “martyred,” a door was being forever closed on our past’ (*Mansion* 73). In ‘The Maid’, the narrator, who is planning to leave Iran after the revolution, tries to find an honest maid for her mother, just like old times, so that she is not alone. However, neither Iran nor the people are the same anymore. Everything is changed, she cannot trust anyone, and soon she is about to leave because her home/motherland is no longer a place of safety or familiarity; it has become a ‘wandering site of nostalgia, exile and alienation’.[[223]](#footnote-223)

Just as the Shemiran house’s destruction is affiliated with the father’s death, the mother’s abandonment, and the country’s critical changes after the revolution, separation from home/motherland is aligned with emotional trauma and physical breakdown of Maheen Banou in ‘A Mansion in the Sky’. Masoud, Maheen Banou’s son, suddenly decides to leave the country after the Iran-Iraq war’s eruption. He hates the war and he shows ‘no inclination to consult others more experienced than he, or more likely to stand their ground either because of fear of change and displacement or of some kind of a moral precept based on the love of one’s homeland and belief in its cultural heritage’ (*Mansion* 100). What he fails to consider amidst the chaotic sale of the house and the furniture is his old mother and that what happens to her after he leaves:

His mother, Maheen Banou, had watched, silently and without protest, all the time the sale of the household was going on. She had seen strangers roam through the house and had not said a word. She had squatted in a corner against a wall, passing her hand over the Tabrizi rug, an heirloom, and tracing its floral designs and golden patterns with her fingertips. It was the relic of bygone days, the remnant of life. (*Mansion* 100)

Maheen Banou loses the house where every brick and stone kept the memories of her life since childhood, and now she feels like she does not have any place of her own in the world: ‘She was in a void, suspended in mid-air’ (*Mansion* 101). Even when she goes abroad and starts living with her son, she does not have a place of her own: she is assigned ‘a corner of the living room floor where she could sleep on a foam mattress. In the morning, she would roll up the mattress and stow it away under a sofa’ (*Mansion* 104). By the time she went to stay with her daughter and her English husband, ‘Maheen Banou had got into the habit of talking to herself’ (*Mansion* 105). After her daughter and son-in-law leave her with a neighbour to go on their customary summer vacation, Maheen Banou’s brother, Karim Khan, who lives in Canada, hears about her humiliating condition and arranges her travel to Canada to stay with him. It is on that flight where she finally finds a place of her own: ‘Her seat was warm and comfortable. That was all she wanted, a place of her own, immune from the encroachment by others’ (*Mansion* 111-112). She has fever, she dozes off under the warmth of the sun, and she dreams, ‘awash in a sea of distant memories’. And finally she breaks down after she arrives in her brother’s house: ‘The sky was an even blue, radiating light and space, expansive and generous. She felt its gaze upon her. As she listened intently, she could only hear the muffled sound of falling snow and the welcome silence of death’ (*Mansion* 116).

Taraghi, in her narrative of exile and its agonies, artistically weaves her criticism of the ‘maternal sensitivity’ that resulted in Maheen Banou’s sacrifices in face of her children’s selfish decisions. She is naturally selfless and ‘[s]he would give anything, including her life, to see them happy and content’ (*Mansion* 101). It is no wonder that she only feels completely relieved of all the boundaries the patriarchal society set for her in her plane seat, somewhere between homeland and exile in the limitless blue of the sky:

It was the highest spot in the world from which the buildings looked humble and people ant-like and insignificant. That was the way things looked from the window of the plane. It was as if she was perched atop her father’s shoulders once again, beyond the reach of everyone: her mother, who admonished her; the dour religious teacher who vexed her with the talk of sin and repentance… Not even her husband, who set the limits of her liberty, could touch her. She was even safe from her children who clung unto her and devoured her flesh and blood with animal ferocity. Nor was she within the reach of those who set moral standards and historical precedents, those who measured her intellect and surveyed the periphery of her thought with the short ruler of geometry and the dismal measures of mathematics. (*Mansion* 115-116)

Somewhere between exile and homeland, Maheen Banou feels relieved that she is free from all that defined and confined her as a woman, a wife, and a mother: from her mother who dictated the very patriarchal patterns that limited her own freedom, from her husband who set the boundaries for what she can do or where she can go, and from her children for whom she has sacrificed all she could offer. These recollections of the past suggest that Taraghi’s depiction of exile is not all nostalgia about the past, and the world of her past is by no means perfect. That is why what she suggests in her fiction is not to give up and give in to the traumas of exile but to search for and re-invent one’s true independent self in the new world.

Maheen Banou’s loss and displacement is revealed in the narration of the traumatic experience of life in exile, where one has lost all that bonded one to the motherland, and has failed in creating a place of one’s own in the new world. For Taraghi, what helped herself survive this state of alienation and trauma is her writing, as she remarks in her story: ‘I make a rope of words, and slowly pull myself up from the depth of darkness, from the bottom of the well’.[[224]](#footnote-224) Once again she wants to write and the only thing she thinks of writing is her past:

I decide to write about my father and our house in Shemiran, about my pretty modern mother who loved to travel in Europe and wear French dresses, about my paternal aunts, who covered their heads, prayed five times a day, and despised Mother and her Western manners. The sounds of the past, the smells, the colors, the startled days filled with pleasure, the sweet physical pulses, the lies, the shame and feeling of guilt, everything, once again, comes back to me and invites me to a grand celebration of words, memories, and stories.[[225]](#footnote-225)

The narrator dreams of her childhood school bus driver, Aziz Agha, and his golden tooth. He has come to claim his place in the stories to come and he gets his own story: the first story in *Khaterat-e Parakandeh*, ‘The Shemiran Bus’. Although this incident marks the beginning of Taraghi’s autobiographical collections, ‘The First Day’ does not end in her writing of the past, but in her return to the present and embracing the life she has started anew with her children: ‘The doctor is satisfied. She orders a nurse to place a telephone in my room. I call my children. The outside world. "Mummy," they cry. "When are you coming home?" I had forgotten that there is a home. A home not in the past, but here, in actual time, in Paris. I cling to their voices, to the miracle of their existence’.[[226]](#footnote-226)

1. **Conclusion**

Kincaid and Taraghi’s idea of writing as the means to survive and re-invent the self resonates with Nancy Chodorow’s observation that individuals are ‘motivated or driven, in order to gain a sense of a meaningful life and manage threatening conscious and unconscious affects and beliefs, to create or interpret external experiences in ways that resonate with internal experiences, preoccupations, fantasies, and senses of self-other relationships’.[[227]](#footnote-227) The writers’ relationship with their mother/land is the driving source of their narratives of exile, in which their social and intellectual identities are challenged. Kincaid’s narratives of the troubled mother-daughter relationship and Taraghi’s narration of the traumatic experience of exile bridge their distance from the mother/land and help them establish their authority. Kincaid and Taraghi have both invented a new landscape that brings together the scattered pieces of memory. They have travelled across time and place, leaving their motherland and searching for another. They lose their mother/land, reclaim it, and eventually replace it. By reconstructing a new reality and reclaiming their identity from memory’s remains, they find themselves reflected in their narratives of their mother/lands.

**Chapter 4**

**Adopting Mothers: A Study of Jackie Kay and Jeanette Winterson’s Narratives of Identity and Adoption**

Everyone, at some time in their life, must choose whether to stay with a ready-made world that may be safe but which is also limiting, or to push forward, often past the frontiers of commonsense, into a personal space, unknown and untried.

Jeanette Winterson[[228]](#footnote-228)

1. **Introduction**

One of the main focuses of this thesis has been women’s autobiographical writings and their portrayals of mother-daughter relationships. The discussion of such narratives in the previous chapter mainly focused on their role in the writers’ attempts to come to terms with the traumatic experiences of their lives. I have also investigated the concept of self-definition in relation to the literary inventions of maternal figures through storytelling. In this chapter, I extend my analysis of mother-daughter relationships to the discussion of adoption in the autobiographically based narratives of Jackie Kay and Jeanette Winterson, exploring the integration of adoption into children’s overall sense of identity. As in the previous chapters, the question of identity and its construction in the face of social discriminations is a significant element in these works. Nonetheless, in this chapter, adoption plays a key role in creating a unique context for identity construction. Winterson’s debut novel, *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* (1985) and Kay’s debut sequence of poetry, *The Adoption Papers* (1991), both deal with the construction of individuality in face of the challenges their adoption raised for them. Kay’s *Red Dust Road* (2010) and Winterson’s *Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal?* (2011) explore further the issues of adoption and identity through narration of their searches for their birth parents. This chapter argues that as writers concerned with identity and marginality, Kay and Winterson explore in their writings the challenges of constructing racial and sexual identity in the context of adoption. In their explorations, these two writers revisit their memories of the past, including fictive memories, and narrate stories of the present, through which they not only recreate their relationship with their birth and adoptive mothers, but also represent their creation of mother figures that have in return helped their self-creation.

The lives of the orphaned, homeless, and neglected have been reflected in many literary works since ancient times. In some of them, adoption has a decisive role in the turn of the plot, the most famous of which is probably Sophocles’ *Oedipus Rex*. The importance of stories and myths such as Oedipus’ is in how they challenge or conform to definitions of parenthood and heredity, and how they represent narratives of identity and selfhood. Such adoption stories set forth the paradoxes inherent in adoption: is an adoptive family a ‘real’ one or is it an imitation of the genetic family? Is a birth mother who has not nurtured or reared the child a ‘real’ mother? Adoption is the borderline area where ambiguity of terms such as mother, father, family, and kinship creates the space for exploring new fluid definitions of identity that are no longer fixed or definite. Although adoption was not legalized until the 20th century in Britain, unofficial adoption has been part of the British society and culture and ‘disturbed genealogies and displaced children’[[229]](#footnote-229) are common in the British novel. The Industrial Revolution and the rise of illegitimacy in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries led to the displacement of many children, so many novels of the time, such as *Jane Eyre* and *Tom Jones*, which are categorised as orphan literature, focus on displaced children.[[230]](#footnote-230) Having discussed well-known works of literature that deal with the concept of adoption, Marianne Novy observes that there are three mythic stories that Western cultures have typically used to imagine adoption: ‘the disastrous adoption and discovery’ as in *Oedipus*, ‘the happy discovery’, as in Shakespeare’s *Winter’s Tale*, and ‘the happy adoption’, as in Dickens’ *Oliver Twist*. She argues that all three myths assume that ‘a child has, in effect, only one set of parents, and although this might seem an acceptable case for many readers, it is far from the reality of adoptees’ lives.[[231]](#footnote-231) These were the main patterns according to which the traditional view of adoption was made. Nonetheless, the introduction of more recent readings of these texts and the emergence of more autobiographical narrations of adoption have provided alternative views of adoption. While many of these novels dramatize the stigmas of illegitimacy and being a poor dependant,[[232]](#footnote-232) the question of identity becomes the focal point of narratives of adoption in the twentieth-century autobiographical narratives of adoption.

Up until the mid-to-late-twentieth century, partly due to the closed adoption policies that insisted on an absolute separation of adoptees from their birth parents and partly due to the stigma of illegitimacy in many of the adoption cases, there was a culture of silence and invisibility shared by many adoptive families. This led to isolation and marginalization of the three parties involved with adoption – adoptee, adoptive family and birth parents – and effected a lack of communication between them and with the rest of society. In the last few decades and mainly due to the adoptees’ rights movement, this has changed and many writers such as Winterson and Kay published their narratives of adoption. The rise of first-person accounts of adoption created the need and the platform for examining if/how identity development differs for adopted persons. According to Harold D. Grotevant, in the overall process of identity development in the adopted, the key element is how they come to terms with their identities as adopted people. Having studied the ways in which a coherent whole is formed and sexual, racial, or religious identities are constructed, Grotevant explores the question of the integration of adoption into one’s overall identity and believes that we need to know ‘how different domains of identity that are assigned (such as one's adoptive status) are related to those that are more freely chosen’.[[233]](#footnote-233) Identity development in adopted children consists of a search for alternative futures as well as understanding the facts of their adoption. As portrayed in Kay and Winterson’s narratives, although adoption can be a potentially traumatic and disruptive experience, it can also provide the space for self-creation. Here, adoption provides the in-between place where the writers and characters exercise the establishment of self and individuality, and adoptive mothers play a significant role in these narratives. Since adoptees usually have little or no information about their birth family, they tend to make up fantasies about them. Ultimately, adoptees ‘construct a different kind of genealogy for themselves in determining what is meaningful to them in both their families as they know and imagine them, somewhat as writers construct their genealogies by their use of literary traditions.[[234]](#footnote-234) By fictionalizing their autobiographies and combining reality and fiction, Kay and Winterson replicate the state of adoption, where family relationships are made-up and the search for the past, for birth parents, becomes the journey through which individuals try to explain their lives and establish their selfhood.

Family and society can have significant effects on one’s construction of individuality. In the case of adoptees, they have an identity ‘thrust upon them’: that is, they are consciously ‘adopted’, and because adoption is construed as ‘marginal’ in a western context, they become ‘marginal’ by default. As Ian Burkitt observes, individuality is socially based and personality forms as social understanding develops.[[235]](#footnote-235) In Kay and Winterson’s narratives of adoption, their adoptive families and their communities contribute to their construction of identity one way or another. While the issue of race and colour of skin becomes a key factor in Kay’s life journey and its narrations, the religious background of her adoptive parents and their intolerance of homosexuals and ‘non-believers’ becomes the focus of Winterson’s narratives. In addition, the racial and sexual discriminations these two writers experience in their communities and reflect in their writings reveal how the dominant discourses of their respective societies contribute to their marginalization. Hence, before analysing these memoirs, I will briefly discuss the relation between children’s personality formation and their surrounding world and will also provide the socio-cultural background of the memoirs for the close readings of the texts that follow.

‘If the literary representation of adoption’, as Sue Vice argues, ‘ensures that the “passing on” of traits and culture takes place at the “intersection between heredity and nurture”,[[236]](#footnote-236) in Kay and Winterson’s case, their interaction with their birth/adoptive/imaginary mothers has played a key role in their development of individuality, and this is reflected in their autobiographical narrations. Having each been adopted at a very young age, Kay and Winterson portray in their works the obstacles they face in their journey to establish their identities, and how this journey is interwoven with their search for their birth mothers. They have very different experiences in their adopted families; while Kay is much-loved and supported by her family and has a very close relationship with her mother, Winterson’s relationship is one of indifference towards her father and painful contempt towards her mother. While Kay’s mother’s unconditional acknowledgment of who she is and wants to be is the driving source in Kay’s search for self, Winterson’s mother’s zeal for reading and reciting the Bible ignites Winterson’s enthusiasm for language and literature. Kay, having been born to a white Scottish mother and a black Nigerian father and adopted by white parents, deals with the issue of race in her narratives and portrays the discriminations she faces in society. Winterson also experiences discrimination, in this case due to her sexuality, and is banished from her family and community. While their debut works deal more with these discriminations and reflect the condition of those who are made marginal by dominant discourses, their latest memoirs, Kay’s *Red Dust Road* (2010) and Winterson’s *Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal?* (2011), portray their efforts in overcoming these obstacles and relate the journey in which they go on to establish their racial/sexual identities.

Kay and Winterson’s autobiographical narratives need to be contextualized. To understand ‘why the lives are depicted as they are when they are’, Nicky Hallett argues in *Lesbian Lives* (1999), ‘we need to know not only about the subject of the life herself, but also about the historical location of the author, and the political exigencies within which each, or both, operated’.[[237]](#footnote-237) In the late twentieth century, dominant social values and ideals were challenged by feminist scholars and writers, leading to the emergence of new voices, forms and subject matters in British literature, represented by these two writers. Emily Horton observes that in face of conservative prejudices against women, homosexuals, immigrants, and minority ethnic communities, writers such as Hanif Kureishi, Kazuo Ishiguro and Bernice Rubens ‘emerged in large part in defence of national devolution’.[[238]](#footnote-238) These writers used a wide variety of styles, including realism, magic realism, and fantasy, reflecting their support for inclusive multiple approaches in their criticism of dominant hegemonic systems. Decentralization of the government was more than only transferring powers from the parliament in London to the Scottish parliament and assemblies in Cardiff and Belfast: it was the time when the notions of national, racial, sexual, cultural, and socio-political identities were challenged and deconstructed. The narratives of writers like Kay and Winterson provide a complex breakdown of racial and gender discourses of their time, combining, as Horton argues, ‘a narrative of self-assertion and increasing political awareness […] with a subtler inquiry into the non-normative aspects of status quo identity’.[[239]](#footnote-239) The inclusion of various cultural and ethnic voices marked a shift in mainstream British literature and gave voice to those who were construed to be marginalized and underrepresented. Consequently, the dominant concept of ‘British’, which was largely defined as white, male, heterosexual, middle class, and English, changed and became more inclusive. Winterson and Kay’s stories – their adoption and the racial/sexual discrimination they experienced in that context – thus reflect the cultural politics of their time. It was a time when unmarried mothers and their children were stigmatized, so many illegitimate babies were given up for adoption. During the 1970s and 1980s, although legally black and white were equal, many black people faced discrimination in society on a daily basis. In addition, heterosexuality was believed by many to be the natural sexual identity and gay and lesbian individuals faced discrimination and harassment.

The cultural politics of the 1980s in Britain were deeply influenced by the ideologies of Margaret Thatcher’s government. For example, in her government and after her notorious speech where she mocked and condemned homosexuality,[[240]](#footnote-240) Section 28 of the Local Government Act 1988 became a law. According to this clause, to ‘intentionally promote homosexuality or publish material with the intention of promoting homosexuality’ or to ‘promote the teaching in any maintained school of the acceptability of homosexuality as a pretended family relationship’ by local authorities became illegal.[[241]](#footnote-241) Nicky Hallett argues that the Act has embedded within it the idea that homosexuals are ‘non-procreative’ and ‘at definitional odds with the family in the real/pretend dichotomy’,[[242]](#footnote-242) leading to marginalizion and stigmatization of homosexuality. Although no prosecution was brought under this section, the government did nothing while ‘queer bashing’ violence escalated, homosexuals were widely demonised, and many support groups were closed.[[243]](#footnote-243) Thatcher’s policies contributed to other socio-political changes in society, one of which, as Fred Botting observes, was a change in national identity: ‘the heady freedom of market, enterprise, investment, credit spending, uninhibited individualism (“greed is good”) introduced new practices and commodities that broke up existing industrial and social orders organized along state boundaries’.[[244]](#footnote-244) This rise of ‘new libertarianism’ of the 1970s and 1980s was a time of ‘cultural revolution’, which took as its justification ‘the unlimited autonomy of individual desire’. These social transformations resulted in ‘breaking the threads which in the past had woven human beings into social textures’, creating more fluid social boundaries; however, it also resulted in a generalized ‘traumatic insecurity’ or ‘incomprehension’.[[245]](#footnote-245) The question of personal identity became more crucial when social identity broke down. These anxieties, traumas, and incomprehension are portrayed in literature of the time where class, race, and gender hierarchies are challenged. A distinctive element in the cultural theory of the time was the focus on identity politics, which provided individuals with the space in which they ‘mapped out their relationship with society’ and often helped them to produce ‘narratives of empowerment across a variety of marginalized subject positions’. One of the spaces in which the politics of identity were explored and multiple identity categories were ‘articulated, dramatized and theorized’ was the novel. Among the identity categories discussed and challenged in the fiction of the period, gender, sexual, racial, and national identities were the central issues.[[246]](#footnote-246) Hence, although the focus on individualism broke down social cohesion, in another sense it enabled a focus on identity that, in the form of ‘identity politics’, actually fostered forms of cohesion and solidarity, while also contesting social exclusion and prejudice. The literature of the time represents the efforts of writers like Winterson and Kay to narrate the marginalized and, as Kay states in an interview, to give ‘a voice to the voiceless’.[[247]](#footnote-247)

Writing autobiographically is to focus on one’s personal identity as an individual, but for Kay and Winterson, it leads in to an intervention into broader social issues. Winterson writes:

Where you are born – what you are born into, the place, the history of the place, how that history mates with your own – stamps who you are, whatever the pundits of globalization have to say. My birth mother worked as a machinist in a factory. My adoptive father laboured as a road mender, then shovelled coal at the power station […] We were the working class. We were the mass at the factory gates. I didn’t want to be in the teeming mass of the working class […] I dreamed of escape […] In a system that generates masses, individualism is the only way out (*WBH* 16-17).[[248]](#footnote-248)

Winterson refuses to be confined by social categories, so she chooses to construct her own sense of individuality. Her writings contribute to the artistic creations that challenged the hegemonic social patterns of the time. Having emerged in the midst of the heated discussions of race, class, and gender in 1980s and 1990s, Winterson’s narrative explores and articulates gender and sexual identities, while Kay’s work represents the politics of ‘difference' and explores the make-up of national and racial identities. Although Kay is also lesbian, the driving force of her writing is mainly race, and this is due to the fact that her family ‘normalised’ her sexuality, so for her notions of so-called ‘difference’ related to ‘colour’ and its racial and national determination. Hence, Kay and Winterson’s writings reveal how culture and society shape individuals’ sense of ‘normal’ and ‘marginal’ identities. These two writers represent how literature can construct identity: self-revelatory narratives portray the link between reality and fiction, and writing of identity and storytelling plays a crucial role in communicating identities and individualities to society. In these two writers’ cases, the question of individuality is also set in the context of adoption, where adoptive mothers play a significant role in their daughters’ self-creation.

Signifying difference within society, adoption is a state where individuals belong and do not belong at the same time; they are part of their adopted family, yet they come from somewhere else; they can love their adoptive family, but they often long to know their past and to meet their birth parents; they are here and there, with their (adopted) parents and without their (birth) parents. It was this in-between place that offered Kay and Winterson a fluid, borderline space, giving them the opportunity to escape the fixed, binary opposites through which society defined them and to voice their identity in their writings. As Mary Watkins observes, ‘[c]ast as an inferior form of family life by dominant taken-for-granted ideas of family and kinship, adoptive family members often improvise forms of relationality and identity that can then enrich the cultural repertoire for identity and family life that becomes accessible to others’.[[249]](#footnote-249) Through their writings they portray the discriminations they have faced and try to communicate how to defy the biased dominant definitions of family, race, sex, or gender and construct one’s own identity. Through the rest of the chapter, I will first explore the notion of identity and its relation to racial and sexual discriminations in Kay and Winterson’s works, and later will examine how representations and creations of adoptive mothers in their narratives help daughters construct their individualities.

1. **Identity and the Questions of Race and Sexuality**

The focus of Kay and Winterson’s narratives is on the questions of where they come from and how they can establish and represent themselves in the context of adoption. As Stuart Hall observes in *Questions of Cultural Identity* (2003), ‘identities are about questions of using the resources of history, language and culture in the process of becoming rather than being: not “who we are” or “where we came from”, so much as what we might become, how we have been represented and how that bears on how we might represent ourselves’.[[250]](#footnote-250) For Kay and Winterson, the construction of identity happens in the context of adoption, and through their writings, they represent how their racial/sexual identities are established through their interactions with their adoptive parents and through their search for and/or imagination of their birth parents.

For Kay, who was born to a white British mother and a Nigerian father and was later adopted as a baby by a Scottish communist couple, national identity is a mixture, played upon by diverse cultural, social and linguistic influences. As a Scottish black woman, Kay identifies with both signifiers, but refuses to be labelled or identified as either of them. In her introduction to a selection of her poems in *New Blood* (1999) she explains, ‘I think I will always be interested in identity, how fluid it is, how people can invent themselves, how it can never be fixed or frozen […] I like mixing fact with fiction and trying to illuminate the border country that exists between them’.[[251]](#footnote-251) She is a poet, a playwright, a novelist, and a writer of children’s literature, who writes at the borderline between genres, creating a fluid style of narration. As Innes observes, although Kay ‘speaks as a poet whose mother culture and mother tongue are British, [she also] writes and speaks as one whose identity is in question, for she is Black, child of an unknown British mother, a Nigerian father, adopted by Scottish parents, she speaks with a Glaswegian accent’.[[252]](#footnote-252) Kay in an interview explains that part of her poetry comes from ‘the tradition of Scottish poetry’; however, she accepts that she is highly influenced by African American writers in her search for identity: ‘You go through various trying on of clothes as far as identity is concerned, rejecting some things about yourself and accepting others. So, at one stage, I felt annoyed with being Scottish and rejected everything to do with being Scottish. I just wanted to embrace being black because for so many years I hadn’t done that’.[[253]](#footnote-253) Having experienced marginalization due to her skin colour, this was her way of adopting her own figurative parental figures with which she could sympathize. However, Kay recalls what the African American poet and essayist, Audre Lorde, said about her identity: ‘You're both. It's fine to be black and Scottish and you don't need to pick and choose’.[[254]](#footnote-254) In ‘The Soil in My Blood’, Kay writes about her mixed origin and acknowledges the contradictions her identity holds:

I have my parents who are not of the same tree

and my brother that is not of my blood

though he is my bloodbrother and

you keep trying to make it matter

the blood, the tie, the passing down

generations.

We all have our contradictions

the ones with the mother’s nose and father’s eyes have them

the blood does not bind confusion

yet I confess to my contradiction

I want to know my blood.[[255]](#footnote-255)

Kay’s reference to ‘tree’ signifies her view of parenthood, suggesting that familial relationships surpass the barrier of genes. She challenges the dominant social pattern that blood ties are more significant than other relationships. Although she and her brother are not genetically related, she calls him a ‘bloodbrother’, signifying that their relationship is as real and relevant as a blood tie. The ‘confusion’ to which Kay refers here is caused by her dual use of the term ‘blood’ for both her biological and adoptive families. This is the very contradiction she talks about in the poem: although she already knows her ‘blood’ (her adoptive family), she wants to know her ‘blood’ (her birth parents). She explains that as both Scotland and Africa are parts of her identity, her adoptive family and her birth parents are equally significant in her construction of selfhood. To Kay, identity is not fixed, and neither is the concept of the family: she is part of two families and communities; she is neither this nor that; she embraces those two apparent contradictions, as they both contribute to her life and her writing. Kay’s country is thus a combination of different experiences, which are reflected in her multi-vocal narratives. In her narration of her Scottish and black identities, Kay maintains the differences, yet avoids the binary opposites of the conventional narrations of racial/sexual identity.

Similarly, Winterson rejects such binary classifications and refuses to be labelled as any particular type of writer, be it political or lesbian, despite representing the social injustices forced upon the marginalized – women, homosexuals, and lower class society. She expresses her disapproval of labelling in an article in the *Evening Standard*, proving that she refuses to be marginalized on account of her sexuality: ‘I have never called myself a lesbian writer, and I would hate to be one. I am a writer. I have a girlfriend. My friends are not “either” gay or straight, they are fun, interesting people, some with children, some not. To me, that’s normal. What is not normal, what is deeply abnormal, is our forensic fascination with gayness’.[[256]](#footnote-256)

Winterson’s use of a first-person narrator in many of her writings suggests that self-expression and self-narration are essential parts of her narratives. Her debut novel, *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* (1985), which established her as a successful British literary figure, is in fact her attempt to explain to herself where she came from: ‘I was trying to make sense of a bizarre childhood and an unusual personal history’.[[257]](#footnote-257) Winterson’s works have largely responded to contemporary socio-political issues in Britain. Sonia Front observes that the timing of her first novel was very good ‘as it was published when the women’s movement was still thriving before its division around the question of sexuality, and when lesbian feminist politics and works had already prepared the ground’.[[258]](#footnote-258) Winterson’s novels are often critical of women’s position in patriarchal societies where their social place or sexual orientation is defined by their gender. Winterson challenges the preconceptions about gender and sexuality in her novel *Written on the Body* (1993), where she deliberately avoids mentioning the narrator’s gender through the whole novel, undermining and deconstructing the notion of fixed gender identity. There is a scene in the novel where the narrator, while looking into a mirror, expresses confusion about his/her ambiguous identity: ‘When I look in the mirror it’s not my own face I see. Your body is twice. Once you once me. Can I be sure which is which?’.[[259]](#footnote-259) By keeping the gender of the narrator unspecified through the whole novel and making the reader constantly speculate about it, Winterson makes gender identity the focal point of her narrative. She addresses the question of sexual and gender identity in her other works. In her introduction to *Oranges* Winterson notes that the quest of her book is ‘one of sexuality as well as individuality’ and that it is comforting ‘not because it offers any easy answers but because it tackles difficult questions’ (*Oranges* xiv).

In *Oranges,* Winterson takes the question of identity head on, starting a quest for her individual sense of selfhood through revisiting her experience of the mother-daughter relationship. Her whole life, she has had the shadow of her adoptive mother’s presence over her life and her writing offers her a chance to review her experience of a troubling maternal relationship. As she states in her introduction to the novel, ‘*Oranges* is comforting not because it offers any easy answers but because it tackles difficult questions. Once you talk about what troubles you, you are some way towards handling it’ (*Oranges* xiv). Having lived in a society where her gender decided her social space and sexual orientation, and having experienced a family life where her relation to her mother was one of an outcast due to her mother’s refusal to accept her as she was, Jeanette refuses to take the burden of a prescribed identity and seeks to establish her original selfhood. As Winterson writes, ‘Everyone, at some time in their life, must choose whether to stay with a ready-made world that may be safe but which is also limiting, or to push forward, often past the frontiers of commonsense, into a personal space, unknown and untried’ (*Oranges* xiv). *Oranges* narrates the creation of that ‘personal space’ in which Jeanette explores the nature of her relationship with her adoptive mother and narrates her own sense of individuality.

Kay’s writings also challenge the prejudices and discriminations exercised in her community and portray her struggles in establishing her individuality. Having observed that according to traditional definitions ‘Scottish’ is white, which contradicts ‘Black’, Nancy K. Gish argues, that to ‘be Scottish in “Britain” is already to be marginalized’, and that the ‘two key sources of identity Kay takes from her “parents”, birth parents and adoptive parents, are thus already “different”, outside the norm’. Hence her ‘multitudes’ of self are drawn from ‘sources presumed to be essentially different from each other and socially marginal in themselves’.[[260]](#footnote-260) Her poem ‘My Grandmother’ depicts the racial prejudice she faced even before her birth as her grandmother, who, as a Scottish person, has experienced racial marginalization and stigmatization under English colonization, refuses to acknowledge her black grandchild:[[261]](#footnote-261)

My grandmother is like a Scottish pine

Tall straight-backed proud and plentiful

[…] My grandmother sits by the fire and swears

*There’ll be no Darkie baby in this house*.[[262]](#footnote-262)

Kay’s introduction of her grandmother, which portrays her as a strong-willed, generous woman, a ‘Scottish pine’, is in sharp contrast to the last line, where she bluntly refuses her own grandchild only due to the colour of her skin. Her grandmother has persevered against racial discrimination, yet she does not hesitate to discriminate against her black grandchild. Kay recalls the stories her adoptive mother told her about her birth parents, wondering if her mum gave her those stories ‘because she thought they compensated for being given up for adoption’: ‘There were the stories of my original parents having no choice, and the stories of my mum and dad having choice. “We chose you; you are special. Other people had to take what they got, but we chose you”’ (*RDR* 43). For Kay, telling stories and survival are ‘intimately connected’ and ‘the imagination has a great power to heal as well as to enthral’, as she states in an interview. She believes it was her adoptive mother who passed on to her the gift of ‘vivid imagination’ and storytelling.[[263]](#footnote-263) Although many of her works are autobiographical, Kay finds it most interesting ‘to take a bit of the real and a bit of the imaginary, a bit of the familiar and a bit of the strange and blend those things together’ in her writing.[[264]](#footnote-264) This mixture of fact with fiction puts her work at the border country that her mixed Nigerian/Scottish identity inhabits, where she can embrace both despite the ‘contradictions’.

Storytelling and survival are connected in Winterson’s narratives, too. ‘*Oranges*’, Winterson writes, ‘has given a voice to many people’s unspoken burdens. And when you have found your voice, you can be heard’ (*Oranges* xiv). She combines fact and fiction in her narratives and believes that they cannot be separated. In *Oranges*, she states: ‘People like to separate storytelling which is not fact from history which is fact. They do this so that they know what to believe and what not to believe […] Knowing what to believe had its advantages. It built an empire and kept people where they belonged’ (*Oranges* 91-92). The driving force of her works has been to question this ‘empire’ of ‘facts’ about everyone’s ‘place’ and to offer an alternative to this dichotomy of fact and fiction, where stories become essential in the construction of life and self. For instance, Sir Perceval’s story and his quest for the Holy Grail are interwoven with Jeanette’s exploration of her selfhood. Jeanette narrates how Sir Perceval dreams of ‘the Holy Grail borne on a shaft of sunlight moving towards him’ and he reaches out crying but her hands are ‘full of thorns’: ‘bitten and bruised’ he dreams of King Arthur’s court, ‘where he was the darling, the favourite’ (*Oranges* 131-132). This is the time when Jeanette’s relationship with Katy is revealed to her family and the church and she is expected to ‘repent’, but she refuses. Sir Perceval’s story helps Jeanette come to terms with her individuality as well as the realities of her life. Winterson’s narrative confirms the importance of storytelling in human life, because according to her, narratives help people to understand/create their selfhood and the world around them:

Storytelling is a way of establishing connections, imaginative connections for ourselves, a way of joining up disparate material and making sense of the world. Human beings love patterns; they love to see shapes and symmetries. We seem to have a need to impose order on our surroundings, which are generally chaotic and often themselves seem to lack any continuity, any storyline.[[265]](#footnote-265)

For Winterson, true art is central to human life and it ‘challenges the “I” that we are’.[[266]](#footnote-266) Through her autobiographical writings she mixes the reality of her life and that of the people around her with fiction in order to create an alternative vision of reality. From her first work onwards, her writings have been critical of female marginalization and for her, marriage symbolizes all that is wrong with the male/heterosexual-privileged society. Her writing ‘exposes the sanctity of family life as something of a sham; it illustrates by example that what the church calls love is actually a psychosis and it dares to suggest that what makes life difficult for homosexuals is not their perversity but other people’s’ (*Oranges* xiii).

*Oranges* centres around Jeanette’s life and her relationship with her Pentecostal adoptive parents, and is a narrative where she questions the credibility of patriarchal narrations of what is ‘normal’ and ‘acceptable’, of ‘how it was’ and ‘how it should be’: ‘Very often history is a means of denying the past. Denying the past is to refuse to recognize its integrity. To fit it, force it, function it, to suck out the spirit until it looks the way you think it should’ (*Oranges* 92). *Oranges* starts with a straightforward, matter-of-fact statement that sets the tone for the rest of the novel: ‘Like most people I lived for a long time with my mother and father. My father liked to watch the wrestling, my mother liked to wrestle; it didn’t matter what. She was in the white corner and that was that’ (*Oranges* 3). Winterson’s opening line represents society’s fixed notion of a family as heterosexual; that a family consists of a father, a mother, and a child, an idea Winterson questions through her writings. It also reveals the central, controlling role her mother plays in the family, whereas her father is a passive, malleable man who hardly speaks and lets his wife make all the decisions, because, as she narrates in her other memoir, her father ‘had never learned to read’ and her mother was ‘in charge of language’ (*WBH* 27). Winterson’s portrayal of the mother, with the authority and language in her possession, contests patriarchal order and Lacan’s theory of language as the ‘law of the father’, according to which sons inherit the father's name by submitting to his prohibitions.[[267]](#footnote-267) Jeanette’s representation of Mrs. Winterson, as Winterson often calls her adoptive mother, not only deconstructs the hegemonic system of patriarchy, but also shifts the paternal inheritance to maternal heritage, which brings about women’s empowerment. Mrs. Winterson, refusing to have children the conventional way (giving birth) and deciding to adopt an orphan, establishes her authority and constructs her own narrative of motherhood. Jeanette narrates that her mother had a ‘mysterious attitude toward the begetting of children’: ‘it wasn’t that she couldn’t do it, more that she didn’t want to do it. She was very bitter about the Virgin Mary getting there first. So she did the next best thing and arranged for a foundling. That was me’ (*Oranges* 3).

Jeanette’s refusal to succumb to the fixed, prescribed identities approved by heterosexual, patriarchal society is a reflection of Mrs. Winterson’s rejection of patriarchal order. Her mother has ‘dedicated’ Jeanette to ‘the Lord’ and wants her to be a missionary, and by the age of fourteen Jeanette becomes the most passionate and persuasive preacher in her congregation. This ends when she is exiled from the church and her community after they find out about her sexual orientation. Just as Kay’s grandmother refuses to acknowledge her granddaughter saying she cannot have a ‘darkie’ in her house, Jeanette’s mother tells her to leave, saying she will not have ‘demons’ in her house, arguing that ‘the Devil’ will look after her since she is of his own (*Oranges* 174). The adolescent Jeanette is bewildered that the society considers her parents’ marriage as natural, however loveless it might be, while her feelings for Melanie are considered abject and condemned as ‘unnatural passions’ by the church (*Oranges* 27). Winterson’s narrative questions this dichotomy of ‘natural, legitimate’ heterosexuality versus ‘unnatural, illegitimate’ homosexuality. After reading ‘Little Red Riding Hood’ and ‘Beauty and the Beast’ at the library, Jeanette, who is exploring the concept of marriage and heterosexual love, comes to the conclusion that, ‘There are women in the world. There are men in the world. And there are beasts’, and is left wondering ‘What do you do if you marry a beast’? (*Oranges* 72) She eavesdrops on her neighbours to find out what they say about their marriages and finds out about their husbands’ drinking problems, violence and unfaithfulness. Her adoptive parents’ loveless marriage and the disfunctionality of the heterosexual relationships around her help her come to terms with her sexual orientation.

Kay’s writing career also starts with autobiographical narrations of her adoption and represents the issues an adopted child and both birth and adopted mothers face in hegemonic systems. As David Ian Paddy observes, ‘Kay uses biography as a starting ground from which to explore the broader conditions of multicultural Britain and identity in general’.[[268]](#footnote-268) Many of the issues raised in her writings were pressing debates in Britain: ‘lone mothers’, ‘reproductive technologies and postmenopausal motherhood’, ‘abortion’, ‘adoption regulations’, and the ‘heterosexually oriented family as the desirable repository for children’ were all issues that occupied public discussions.[[269]](#footnote-269) Her first collection of poems, *The Adoption Papers* (1991), discusses the role of parentage in shaping the child’s sense of identity, though she does not try to imply any simplistic link between identity and place. *The Adoption Papers* is a semi-autobiographical sequence of poems, divided into time periods that correspond with Kay’s life, and relayed in three distinct female voices – child, birth mother, and adoptive mother. These poems narrate the story of her birth, adoption, and life in the loving household of her adoptive parents despite the society’s prejudices. Through multiple masks and different voices, Kay’s poems flicker between oppositions and explore ‘authenticity, allegiance, origins and memory’.[[270]](#footnote-270) By choosing a different typeface for each voice, Kay manages to avoid any intervening explanations, providing a sense of urgency in narrating the intense feelings of each voice. Although the three speakers do not talk to each other, time and space link them and their narratives together. The first lines by each speaker are revealing confessions that set the whole story of adoption down at once. While the adoptive mother begins, declaring that she ‘always wanted to give birth’ and when she realized she couldn’t, she ‘nearly broke down’, the daughter states that the ‘gash’ down her left cheek was due to the fact that she was pulled out with ‘forceps’ when she was born. And the birth mother begins by confessing that although a long time has passed since she gave birth to her daughter and gave her to adoption (‘She is twenty-six today/ my hair is grey’), she still keeps the ‘baby photograph’ in her ‘bottom drawer’.[[271]](#footnote-271)

The three personas all express alienation in society through their narrations of the adoption. The birth mother recalls people’s reaction when seeing her with her Nigerian date:

when we walked out heads turned

like horses, folk stood like trees

their eyes fixed on us – it made me

burn, that hot glare: my hand

would sweat down to his bone.

Finally, alone, we’d melt

nothing, nothing would matter (*AP* 2-6)

Kay’s use of ‘horses’ as similes for people suggests the inhuman nature of the racial prejudice to which the couple were exposed, whereas the imagery in the second part (e.g. ‘sweat’ and ‘melt’) implies the couple’s love and intimacy. Her emphasis on the words ‘alone’ and ‘nothing’ foretells the outcome of a relationship which is not acknowledged by society. Kay questions society’s perception of the love between a black man and a white woman as being ‘unnatural’, just as Winterson challenges the Church’s view of homosexuality as ‘unnatural’. Kay’s birth mother is doubly alienated in her community in the sense that not only is carrying an African man’s child as a white woman taboo, but to be a single mother is also not easily accepted; hence, she gives up her baby for adoption. It is not just the birth mother who experiences marginalization; the adoptive mother also faces discrimination for adopting black children. To adopt meant to accept that you had failed: ‘telling the world your secret failure / bringing up an alien child’ (*AP* 26). The adoptive mother and her husband tried to have a child for many years, but they failed to conceive and decided to adopt. However, they were repeatedly turned down on the grounds that they were not religious, so not suitable to adopt. The inherent racism of the society is most apparent when the couple reminds the agency that they ‘don’t mind the colour’ and ‘just like that, the waiting was over’. It is the adoptive mother who always tries to protect her children from the society’s questioning gaze and answer their nonstop queries. In *Red Dust Road*, Kay’s adoptive mother recalls how they were surrounded and questioned by the locals on their trip to Mull: ‘the local people gathered around you and your brother; they had obviously never seen anyone that looked like you, there was no harm in it, and they came up to me and said, Do they have the English? And I thought, Bloody cheek, most of you don’t have the English, because a lot of them still only spoke Gaelic then’.[[272]](#footnote-272) The adopted child is the one who experiences the most discrimination due to her adoption and her skin colour. When her identity and place is questioned by other children who call her Sambo, she feels she has no choice other than fighting for her individuality: ‘I chase his *Sambo Sambo* all the way from the School gate. / […] I shove him up against the wall, / say that again you wee shite. *Sambo, sambo*, he’s crying now’ (*AP* 24). Yet it is not the ‘Chocolate Drop racism of children’ that hurts and bewilders Kay the most; it is rather the ‘sinister’, ‘scary’, and hateful attitude she experiences from the adults that leaves her speechless. She recalls when a middle-aged man scorns her at the park when she was sixteen: ‘Why did you do that? Put your empty can on the ground? Don’t you know we like to keep our land tidy? Where do you come from anyway? A little mud hut’? (*RDR* 187)

Kay, in her poem ‘Kail and Callaloo’, explores her own racial/cultural identity, questioning this view that to have a mixed background is contradictory: ‘you know the passport forms/ or even some job applications noon-a-days?/ Well, there’s nowhere to write/ Celtic-African-Caribbean/ in answer to the origin questions/ they think that’s a contradiction/ how kin ye be both?’.[[273]](#footnote-273) Kay merges her black and Scottish identities, both of which represent the marginalized in British society; hence, her poem gives voice to this fluid identity that can be both and neither:

I’m eating callaloo and kail now

[…] so many foods I never tasted

[…] like I never read Ngugi or Bessie Head

only Hugh MacDiarmid and Liz Lochhead

(and they werenie even taught in school)

Liz was my teenage hero

OCH MEN and her stop and start rhythm

I’d never heard of Audre Lorde then.[[274]](#footnote-274)

Although to be both black and Celtic is considered impossible by society, Kay, through her use of Scottish voice and idioms (wee, kin, ye) and African concepts (callaloo), inscribes and gives voice to this mixed African-Scot identity. Her combination of the African and Scottish names such as Ngugi and Lochhead creates the rhythm of the poem, which represents all the contrasting elements that construct her selfhood. The juxtaposition of themes in this poem and Kay’s other works creates the space in which the narrator’s identity can include both ‘Kail’ and ‘Callaloo’, both Scottish and African-Caribbean. Kay’s poetry is a testimony to the reality that society denies: that not all families consist of birth parents and their children, and that it is possible to raise children of other colours/ethnicities and still be considered a family.

As a black child, adopted by white parents, Kay lives and writes on the borders, and her poem ‘In my country’ is her assertion of this identity, which is Scottish as well as black. When a woman asks her ‘*Where do you come from?*’, she answers ‘Here. These parts’.[[275]](#footnote-275) Her dual background has made her sensitive to the idea of cultural difference and her poem exposes her daily experience of being made to feel like an outsider in her own country. Even when she finds her birth father, she keeps wondering if she has any right to make herself known to his family, as his child, as a member of their family: ‘do I have the right to suddenly turn up at the door, Outlook window, or wherever? Do I have the right to text, Twitter, message or ring? Do I have the right to announce myself, whatever form the announcement takes’ (*RDR* 177)? When Kay goes to Nigeria to meet her father, she is made to feel out of place because her dark skin, which made her stand out in Scotland, is not black enough in Africa, so she looks like a foreigner. When she goes to the market, a crowd gathers round her shouting ‘Oyibo!’ meaning ‘white person’. Kay writes:

I spent some of my childhood wishing I was white like the other kids and feeling like I stuck out in Scotland like a sore thumb; and now, in Nigeria, I’m wishing I was black, and feeling like I stick out like a sore thumb. It’s the first time in my life that I’ve properly understood what it means being mixed race. It’s not a term I’ve ever embraced, and I’ve always felt more black than white; but now here suddenly in Nigeria, people are following me around Ukpor market and touching my skin and saying *Oyibo* and *Oye ocha*! I realize I want to be accepted. (RDR 216)

Where is home or where do you come from? is one of the major themes in Kay’s writings. In an interview, Kay explains how adopted people face discrimination, because others question their origin: ‘adopted people are always thought of like this: “well we don’t really know their bloodline, so we don’t really know what has gone into them, so we don’t know a lot about them”’.[[276]](#footnote-276) Helen Dunmore, discussing these fundamental questions in contemporary poetry, observes, ‘Is home where you were born, is it where you live, is it where you speak the language, or is it simply where you feel at home?... To ask “Where do I come from?” invites, for many poets, many possible answers’.[[277]](#footnote-277) For Kay, whose parental and adoptive backgrounds have animated her cultural present, to use place as a cultural identifier is complex, yet enriched by her social alienation. The questioner’s ‘Where do you come from’ pursues the cultural ‘otherness’ forced upon her by the society, and ‘These parts’ reflects her confident claim of her home and birthright.[[278]](#footnote-278) The woman’s question symbolizes the racial prejudices inherent in society and Kay’s poem signifies her right and her place to which she is entitled. In *Red Dust Road*, Kay explains the consequences of such racial attitudes on her especially when she was young:

Part of me came from Africa, part of me was foreign to myself since I had never been to the *dark continent* and could only really have it burning away, hot and dusty, in my mind. It is not so much that being black in a white country means that people don’t accept you as, say, Scottish; it is that being black in a white country makes you a stranger to yourself. It is not the foreign without; it is the foreign within that is interesting. Every time somebody in your own country asks you where you are from; every time you indignantly reply, ‘I’m from here,’ you are subconsciously caught up in asking that question again and again of yourself, particularly when you are a child. (*RDR* 38)

Her 1984 poem ‘So you think I’m a Mule’ reflects the fact that although she has acknowledged her African-Scot identity, not many people are willing to accept such an idea and consider the two as exclusive identities. In response to a woman’s question ‘Where do you come from?’, the black speaker answers ‘I’m from Glasgow’, and when faced by the woman’s bewilderment and ‘Ah, but you’re not pure/… you’re a mulatto’, the speaker, who is fed up by such daily inquiries about her parents, bursts out:

You see that fine African nose of mine,

my lips, my hair, You see lady

I’m not mixed up about it.

[…] There's a lot of us

Black women struggling to define

just who we are

where we belong

and if we know no home

we know one thing:

we are Black

we're at home with that.[[279]](#footnote-279)

Kay’s use of the verb ‘mixed up’ suggests that although she is considered a ‘mulatto and of mixed origins, she is not confused about her identity and knows where she belongs, and the repetition of ‘my’ and ‘we’ connotes this belonging. Kay, commenting on the origin of this poem, says in an interview that she wrote the poem because probably every Black person in Scotland is asked the question, ‘Where do you come from?’ which implies ‘You don’t belong here’ and ‘Go back to where you come from’.[[280]](#footnote-280) What is significant in Kay’s response in this poem is that the uncertainty about ‘where she comes from’ does not mean she does not know ‘who she is’. She refuses to believe that in order to locate one’s identity, one needs to locate one’s origin. Kay’s narrators elevate displacement, dislocation and estrangement, since it is the fluid notion of family in the context of adoption and the borderline between binaries that provide them with the space for self-creation.

While racial marginalization is the driving force of Kay’s writings, the sexual discriminations Winterson faces in her adoptive family as well as in society form the core of her narratives. For Winterson, being an adoptee has an analogous position to being a homosexual, because both put the person at the mercy of predefined identities. The adopted person experiences similar discrimination to that which homosexuals face due to society’s idealized image of a heterosexual/biological family as the norm. Margot Gayle Backus argues that Jeanette’s adoption ‘confirms the sense of middle-class, heterosexual normativity that Jeanette’s mother originally sought to establish through her youthful conversion to evangelical Christianity’. [[281]](#footnote-281) Jeanette’s mother felt betrayed when she realized that her daughter was not going to turn out to be the missionary she wanted her to be. In describing her mother’s idea of adoption and her conversion to evangelism, Jeanette imagines: ‘mother, out walking that night, dreamed a dream and sustained it in daylight. She would get a child, train it, build it, dedicate it to the lord’ (*Oranges* 10).

Winterson believes that adopted children are ‘dislodged’. To be adopted, for her, means to lose ‘the warm safe place, however chaotic, of the first person [she] loved’. She has lost her ‘name’ and her ‘identity’ and she wants to go ‘Home’ (*WBH* 23). In her writing, Winterson represents ‘reality and ‘identity’ as unstable concepts, hence the ‘self’ and the world it inhabits are constantly in flux.[[282]](#footnote-282) Similar to Jackie Kay, Winterson believes ‘you and your world are not by any means fixed dimensions’ (*WBH* 35), and that ‘the only boundaries are the boundaries of the imagination’.[[283]](#footnote-283) Her fictional characters also try to free themselves from boundaries and limitations. She herself left her parents’ house at sixteen when they failed to accept the fact of her sexuality and did not acknowledge her relationship with another woman.

For Winterson, ‘adoption is outside’: ‘You act out what it feels like to be the one who doesn’t belong. And you act it out by trying to do to the others what has been done to you. It is impossible to believe that anyone loves you for yourself’ (*WBH* 7). Winterson did not have the ‘unconditional love’ she expected from her parents, so she believes that love could not be depended upon; hence her failures in her love life when an adult: ‘When love is unreliable and you are a child, you assume that it is the nature of love – its quality – to be unreliable. Children do not find fault with their parents until later. In the beginning the love you get is the love that sets’ (*WBH* 76). Having been disappointed in getting a girl instead of a boy for adoption, Mrs. Winterson projects this disappointment on to her daughter, taking every opportunity to beat and punish the ‘ungrateful’ soul into a pious missionary. In addition, she feels her daughter has failed her when she finds out about Jeanette’s sexuality. Jeanette’s relationship with her mother has a lasting influence on her relationships with other women in her life: ‘One thing I am certain of, I do not want to be betrayed […] there are different kinds of infidelity, but betrayal is betrayal wherever you find it. By betrayal, I mean promising to be on your side, then being on somebody else’s’ (*Oranges* 165-166). Her mother’s cancellation of the mother-daughter tie because of her daughter’s sexual preference was the utmost betrayal Jeanette experienced, which wounded her for life. Mrs. Winterson’s world is one of binary oppositions: good or evil, right or wrong, fact or fiction: ‘[s]he had never heard of mixed feelings. There were friends and there were enemies’ (*Oranges* 3). Jeanette’s life is defined by this very binarism and through her resistance to it. Winterson writes that her stories are ‘part fact part fiction’; however, there is no real line between the two and as she acknowledges herself, even when narrating the facts, she writes a cover story that she ‘could live with’ (*WBH* 6). Nonetheless, Winterson’s memoirs become Jeanette’s narratives, through which she writes her way out of Mrs. Winterson’s narration of Jeanette’s life and identity. In the next section of the chapter, I will discuss in what ways Winterson and Kay’s representations of adoption and their recreations of adopted mothers help them to establish their own narratives of their selves.

1. **Adoptive Mothers and Construction of Identity**

For Kay and Winterson, identity is self-created, and their adoption forms the context in which they can perform their acts of self-actualization. Imagination and narration provides them with the family they can adopt and rely on, and through their writings they both adopt maternal figures with whom they identify. This does not negate the concept of self-creation: the creation and narration of these adoptive mothers helps them decline society’s definition of their selves and offers them the choice of who they can be and where they can belong. Kay’s refusal to be labelled as ‘mulatto’, ‘hybrid’, ‘half-caste’ in ‘So you think I am a Mule’ depicts her notion of identity, which is fluid rather than fixed, static, or unchanging and ‘changes with culture and with time and with perspective’.[[284]](#footnote-284) According to her, ‘the adopted person’s identity is even more fluid than that of a person who is not because everything that is behind them is moving… the past is constantly open to dreams, imagination, fantasy, and interpretation. It’s something that can be invented: the possibilities for the adopted person to constantly re-invent themselves are endless’.[[285]](#footnote-285)

Kay’s adoption, her African-Scottish background, and her birthparents’ absence led her to feel a void, which she decided to fill through her own narrative of identity:

Some people have a great sense of their own past, feel that their grandmother or their great-great-grandmother, or people they never met are part of them because they’ve heard stories about them and because they’ve got their eyes, their nose, or whatever, and I suppose I’ve created for myself that sense of identity from not having those things genetically, but from finding other ways to get those things.[[286]](#footnote-286)

There are two figures, Angela Davis (an African American activist and scholar) and Bessie Smith (an African American blues singer), who play significant roles in Kay’s attempt in finding ‘those things’. Stuart Hall argues that identification, in common sense language, is constructed through ‘recognition of some common origin or shared characteristics with another person or group, or with an ideal, and with the national closure of solidarity and allegiance established on this foundation’.[[287]](#footnote-287) However, identities are also the product of specific historical and cultural sites, and as Hall points out, ‘they emerge within the play of specific modalities of power, and thus are more the product of making of difference and exclusion, than they are the sign of an identical, naturally-constituted unity – an “identity” in its traditional meaning’.[[288]](#footnote-288) Kay writes:

Angela Davis is the only female person

I’ve seen (except for a nurse on TV)

who looks like me. She had big hair like mine

[…] Her skin is the same too you know. (*AP* 27)

Davis is not just someone with whom Kay can physically identify; she is the role model Kay aspires to be as a child (‘If I could be as brave as her when I get older/ I'll be OK’), she is the epitome of all the qualities Kay needs in order to face the social prejudices (‘she wouldn't put up with stuff’), and she is the maternal figure Kay adopts in order to construct her identity. Bessie Smith, the blues singer, is another role model Kay adopts and idolizes in her journey of self-creation. She narrates in her biographical book *Bessie Smith* (1997): ‘I will always associate the dawning of my own realization of being black with the blues, and particularly Bessie’s blues’.[[289]](#footnote-289) Having never seen another black person in her neighbourhood, Kay sees Bessie as a reflection of her own self:

I could not separate them. I could not separate myself. I am the same colour as she is. I thought to myself, electrified. I am the same colour as Bessie Smith. I am not the same colour as my mother, my father, my grandmother, my grandfather, my friends, […] the shock of not being like everyone else; the shock of my own reflection came with the blues. My own face in the mirror was not the face I had in my head.[[290]](#footnote-290)

This confusion and this feeling of being out of place leads Kay to adopt in turn Bessie and Davis as maternal figures that help her to appropriate a link with a black identity while retaining her connection with her Scottish background.

For Kay, although her experiences and memories with her adoptive family are closely related to her identity construction, her journey of finding and meeting her birth parents also contributed to this process. Her memoir of her journey to Africa is highly informed by her profound need to satisfy her ‘all-consuming insatiable appetite for self-knowledge’ (*RDR* 47) and her desire to feel ‘some connection’ with her origins (*RDR* 169), because to Kay, the former is possible only if she can feel that bond. Her memoir not only explores the construction of selfhood of an adopted dual heritage child, but also portrays her attempts to comprehend her dual Scottish-Nigerian background. Just as her mother’s stories helped her to understand her adoption better, her own narratives provided the space to explore her identity beyond the adoptive and genetic boundaries.

Kay’s quest to resolve the mystery of her birth and adoption and her attempt to put the scattered parts of the puzzle together in her autobiographical narrations was not because she was not loved or acknowledged by her adoptive parents; it was due to the fact that as a black woman of a mixed background she had no other choice than to try to define herself rather than letting society do it for her: ‘It is not so much that being black in a white country means that people don’t accept you as, say, Scottish; it is that being black in a white country makes you a stranger to yourself’ (*RDR* 38). Some might argue that her search for her Nigerian roots might imply that ‘blood’ is an essential aspect of identity and this contradicts the notion of a self-created identity. I believe that her quest for roots is not due to her inability to construct her identity without establishing her biological lineage: it is primarily an act of asserting her autonomy, rather than recourse to a biological essentialism of identity. It is in *The Adoption Papers* that Kay finds her voice as a writer, narrates the story of her adoption, and poses the questions of self and individuality. In her memoir and prose sequel to *The Adoption Papers*, *Red Dust Road* (2010), she further develops her narrative voice and finds out more about herself through the journey on which she explored her adoption and met her birth parents. Kay narrates:

I was never told much about my father because my parents were never told much. Adopted people were told hardly anything then, not like today when children are given whole family books, photographs, information and in some instances are encouraged, through open adoptions, to keep in touch with their birth parents. It is an intriguing concept but I always wonder how can a child live in two worlds with only one life? (*RDR* 38)

Kay’s writings portray all the questions and confusion an adopted child faces while trying to construct his/her self. While Kay’s earlier poetry reflected her search for her identity through her recreation of her parents and her adoption, *Red Dust Road* is where she hears back from her birth parents, meets her father and her brother in Nigeria, and reexamines her expectations, leading to her reevaluation of her values and strengthening her ties with her family. Kay’s insistence on finding her origin stems from her desire to find the meaning of the things that her adoption made impossible to understand: ‘I’ve become so accustomed to reading everything in signs. I have done this all my life; but now that I’m in Nigeria, my obsession with what things mean suddenly seems to make sense, because everybody does it. It is an Igbo way’ (*RDR* 246).[[291]](#footnote-291) Toward the end of *Red Dust Road*, when she and her brother are walking hand in hand together toward the stadium café, she feels connected to her African heritage and sees them as ‘brother and sister’ as if they had known each other all of their lives (*RDR* 271). Kay’s search for her roots in Africa is an extension of her acknowledgment of her Scottish roots. Her love for her adoptive mother and her fear of losing her is reflected in her poem ‘After Mammy Told Me She Wasnie My Real Mammy’: ‘I was scared to death she was gonnie melt/or something or mibbe disappear in the dead/of night and somebody would say she was a fairy/ godmother’.[[292]](#footnote-292) Kay’s use of ‘fairy’ and ‘godmother’ here can suggest her critical view of society’s perception of an adoptive family as an ‘unreal’ as opposed to the ‘real’ birth family, but it also suggests a magical element that her adoptive mother’s presence adds to Kay’s life, transforming her from an unwanted child to a most cherished daughter. In *Stolen Glances*, Kay has chosen three photos to accompany her poems: a photo of herself when she was a child for the poem ‘The Soil in My Blood’, one of herself with her adoptive mother for ‘After Mammy Told Me She Wasnie My Real Mammy’, and one of herself with her son for ‘The Visit’.[[293]](#footnote-293) The succession of the poems and the photos overlaps the narratives of mothers and daughters and represents the continuity of the tie on which Kay’s writings mainly focus.

For Winterson, her adoption and her destructive relationship with her adoptive parents, especially her mother, were the main sources of her writings; hence, Jeanette is the protagonist and the narrator of both her autobiographical novels. Jeanette’s identity is shaped against the beliefs and teachings of Mrs. Winterson. As Hall argues,

[Identities] are constructed through, not outside, difference. This entails the radically disturbing recognition that it is only through the relation to the Other, the relation to what it is not, to precisely what it lacks, to what has been called its *constitutive outside* that the ‘positive’ meaning of any term – and thus its ‘identity’ – can be constructed.[[294]](#footnote-294)

Winterson’s narrative of identity emerges out of being treated as the ‘Other’, being not what she was expected to be, being different to what Mrs. Winterson wanted her to become. Winterson recalls that after Mrs. Winterson read her first novel, she confronted her with the fact that she used her own name in the novel and asked why if it was a story, the main character is called Jeanette. Winterson writes:

Why? I can’t remember a time when I wasn’t setting my story against hers. It was my survival from the very beginning. Adopted children are self-invented because we have to be; there is an absence, a void, a question mark at the very beginning of our lives. A crucial part of our story is gone, and violently, like a bomb in the womb. The baby explodes into an unknown world that is only knowable through some kind of story – of course that is how we all live, it’s the narrative of our lives, but adoption drops you into the story after it has started. It’s like reading a book with the first few pages missing. It’s like arriving after curtain up. The feeling that something is missing never, ever leaves you – and it can’t, and it shouldn’t, because something *is* missing. (*WBH* 5)

She adds that to have something missing in your life is not of a negative nature, because ‘[t]he missing part, the missing past, can be an opening, not a void. It can be an entry as well as an exit’. Although she can never have that past and that life, her fingers ‘trace the space where it might have been’, she reads them, reads ‘the hurt’, and rewrites it. Her past, ‘the imprint of another life’, is ‘the fossil record’ that she analyses as she writes about it, and she believes this is why she is a writer: ‘To avoid the narrow mesh of Mrs. Winterson’s story I had to be able to tell my own’ (*WBH* 5).

Mrs. Winterson is the centre of both of Winterson’s narratives and the force that has influenced her life as much as her writing. Jeanette’s relationship with her adoptive mother in the narrative is the source of her wounds, but it is also her mother who provides her with the means of recovery: language. In the early years of Jeanette’s life, mother and daughter shared a bond of care and common ambitions, and Mrs. Winterson taught her to be a missionary: ‘She taught me to read from the Book of Deuteronomy, and she told me all about the lives of the saints, how they were really wicked, and given to nameless desires’ (*Oranges* 15). This bond was broken as Jeanette grew up and embraced her sexual orientation, and her sexphobic, homophobic mother refused to acknowledge her daughter’s sexual identity. Nonetheless, Mrs. Winterson’s zeal for reading and her powerful imagination were the legacies that helped Jeanette establish her selfhood. Mrs. Winterson read the Bible every night and she read it ‘as though it had just been written’. By reading the Bible every evening, Jeanette gets a sense that the ‘power of a text is not time-bound’ and that the ‘words go on doing their work’ (*WBH* 27). Asked in an interview about the source of her passion for language, Winterson answers: ‘I suppose it comes from the Bible. I was raised on the Bible. I dare say I know it better than anybody else, certainly most modern people, and it is a wonderfully written book. It contains in its ways of speaking, parables and stories, fictions, which are very potent and very personal’.[[295]](#footnote-295)

Her adoptive mother’s authoritative teachings of the Bible have such a significant effect on Winterson’s life that she builds *Oranges* on the structure of the Bible. Even the title can be interpreted as a Biblical symbol, and since Jeanette’s lebianism is considered sinful, *Oranges* can be an allusion to ‘the fruit of knowledge’, and its ‘implied sexual sin’.[[296]](#footnote-296) Winterson divides the novel into eight sections, giving each the titles of the first eight books of the Bible, from Genesis to Ruth. While ‘Genesis’ narrates Jeanette’s birth, her adoption, and her indissoluble relationship with her adoptive mother, in the chapter entitled ‘Exodus’ Jeanette is sent to school where she experiences the life of an outsider, at first because of her mother’s unorthodox trainings and later due to her lesbianism. Winterson’s choice of ‘Ruth’ as the last chapter indicates liberation from patriarchal patterns as well as the sense of connection between women, referring to the pledge Ruth makes to Naomi, her mother-in-law, to stay with her: ‘Whither thou goest, I will go…thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God’.[[297]](#footnote-297) Such a structure not only signifies the fact that her adoptive mother shaped and controlled her life according to the Bible, but also narrates Jeanette’s escape from the scripture-obsessed world of her mother and her formation of her own narrative and identity. Winterson believes that literature can make a difference, but it was the religious teachings of her Pentecostal Evangelists parents that led her to writing, because she wanted to write sermons, preach to people, convert them, and make a difference.[[298]](#footnote-298) Although her mother forbids her from reading secular books, by acquainting Jeanette with the magic of words and the joy of reading and writing through the Bible, she opens the doors to new worlds and gives her the means of survival.

Books are home for Winterson. They are like doors, you open one and you go inside: ‘[i]nside there is a different kind of time and a different kind of space. There is warmth there too – a hearth’ (*WBH* 61). Winterson narrates how her mother would lock her out at night and how she spent night after night on doorsteps in the cold. It was these books that kept her warm on those ‘chilly nights on the doorstep’. She also spent most of her school years on the railings outside the school gates. She had no friends and even when she made friends, she would end it. For Winterson, reading books opens a window through which she can see other alternatives to the predefined identity, in which her family had confined her.

Winterson is fascinated by the power of art, especially literature, and she represents in her works how literature can challenge the hierarchical perceptions of identity and defy the binary oppositions that set identity as a fixed reality, constructing in the human imagination new realities and new social or sexual identities. She states in *Lighthousekeeping*:

I believe that storytelling is a way of navigating our lives, and that to read ourselves as fiction is much more liberating than to read ourselves as fact. Facts are partial. Fiction is a more complete truth. If we read ourselves as narrative, we can change the story that we are. If we read ourselves as literal and fixed, we find we can change nothing. Someone will always tell the story of our lives–it had better be ourselves.[[299]](#footnote-299)

Through references to myths and biblical stories, she revises the patriarchal narratives that restrict alternative constructions of self. As Anne Mihan observes, through inserting many tales and stories from the character’s life or accounts and feeding them into the main narrative of her protagonist, she constructs her identity: ‘In her characters Winterson illustrates what she has learned about the narrative construction of her own identity […], the “me” she “[goes] on creating” through her writing in a “curious process” that is still continuing. [[300]](#footnote-300) Mihan adds that to first understand who they are and then to present an identity to the world, Winterson’s protagonists first collect information about their existence from ‘their memory, from stories they have been told about themselves, from what they read or heard […], from dreams and wishes they have’, and then ‘they piece together an autobiographical narrative from the scraps of stories they have collected over time’.[[301]](#footnote-301) To be able to use language and to tell stories is crucial for Winterson and her protagonists in creating an independent identity. *Oranges* depicts this connection between using language and seeking one’s identity. Although books were prohibited in her adoptive parents’ house, to read and to recite the stories in the Bible is an important part of her childhood, which leads her to read secretly works of literature. Even when her mother burns her books, she finds solace in reciting the words.

A stressful and frustrating interpersonal life is mostly the product of insecure relationships, where individuals develop an understanding of their selves and where their feelings and behaviours are formed, so to discover a caring relation can be the medium in which individuals can redefine or reform the previously acquired feelings and behaviours. Elsie Norris is the fictional maternal character through whom Jeanette receives the love and support in the absence of a mother: she is the one who ‘looks after the little Jeanette and acts as a soft wall against the hurt (ling) force of Mother’ (*WBH* 6). Elsie represents the maternal figure Winterson adopts in her writing in order to feel loved and to identify with. After her operation, it is Elsie who goes and visits Jeanette at the hospital, while her mother fails to do so (*Oranges* 39). Elsie is not the only maternal figure, who provides Jeanette with the warmth and empathy she lacks at home. The way Winterson weaves fairytales and old stories into her narrative depicts how essential all these texts are in her narration of self-creation. One of the six books available at home was *Morte d’Arthur* by Thomas Malory: ‘the stories of Arthur, of Lancelot and Guinevere, of Merlin, of Camelot and the Grail, docked into me like the missing molecule of a chemical compound’ (*WBH* 37). These are the characters in whose images Jeanette sees herself, whose ‘loss’, ‘loyalty’, ‘failure’, ‘longing’, ‘recognition’, ‘second chances’ reflect that of hers. It is through these stories that Jeanette realizes that ‘there might be a second chance’, that ‘the finding/losing, forgetting/remembering, leaving/returning, never stops’, that ‘the whole life is about another chance’, and Winterson finds hers through her books (*WBH* 38). When Jeanette’s mother burns her books, Winterson writes, she tries to collect stray bits and pieces of texts, and this to her symbolizes her own act of writing: ‘*These fragments have I shored against my ruin*’(*WBH* 41). The books were gone, but ‘what they held could not be easily destroyed’. So Winterson, instead of mourning for the lost stories, decides to write one of her own (*WBH* 43).

To write, for Winterson, is to connect and to communicate; it is to search for the warmth she finds missing in her life. Her search for her birth mother signifies this search for love, support, and acknowledgement. Winterson narrates that she never wanted to find her birth parents: ‘if one set of parents felt like a misfortune, two sets would be self-destructive’. She had no understanding of family life, and she did not realize that it is possible for parents to love their children enough to let them be themselves. She was a ‘loner’ and ‘self-invented’: ‘I didn’t believe in biology or biography. I believed in myself. Parents? What for? Except to hurt you’ (*WBH* 155). However, after she turns thirty, she decides to look for her birthparents, to look for the missing piece of the puzzle, to find the source of the patterns of rejection she repeated in her life. Through her work, Winterson found a medium to talk about and explore love: ‘I taught myself to stand on my own two feet, but I could not teach myself how to love. We have a capacity for language. We have a capacity for love. We need other people to release those capacities’ (*WBH* 186). When Winterson finds her birth mother, she finds her a ‘straightforward and kind’ person who easily acknowledges her sexual orientation and has no problem with it. This is not what she either expected or was used to. Things have never been easy for her, and now she wonders what her life would have been like if her adoptive mother had said ‘Oh, your dad and I don’t have a problem with that’ (*WBH* 215). Her birth mother tried to provide her with a better chance by giving her up for adoption, and although what Winterson experienced with her adoptive parents and without her birth parents’ love wounded her, it was also why she is the writer she is now. She left her adoptive parents’ house in search for a home and she found one in books.

1. **Conclusion**

Kay and Winterson’s narratives, depicting the role of adoptive mothers in their daughters’ acts of self-actualization, highlight the significance of storytelling in creation of autonomous identities. One of the epigraphs in the beginning of *Red Dust Road* is a quotation by Hélène Cixous: ‘All biographies like all autobiographies like all narrative tell one story in place of another’. In Kay and Winterson’s writings narratives of birth and adoptive mothers and their daughters overlap, creating a space where identities are explored. Their autobiographical journeys are self-revelatory, but they also speak to the universal experience of being oneself, of being true to oneself. Literature for Kay and Winterson is a political site, where their imagination and real-life experiences are linked and alternative manifestations of identities and social realities are introduced. As Stephen Spender argues, ‘In literature the autobiographical is transformed. It is no longer the writer’s own experience: it becomes everyone’s. He (sic) is no longer writing about himself: he is writing about life’.[[302]](#footnote-302) We can see this transformation in Kay and Winterson’s narration. They themselves become the means of transformation, introducing new interpretations of the world and new ways of living. As Winterson observes, writing helps one understand and appreciate life and cope with the negative feelings accumulated through life:

[Writing] can put you in a position which is both inside and outside of yourself, so that what you get is a depth of knowledge, otherwise not possible, about your own situation, and a *context* in which to put that situation, so you’re no longer alone with feelings that you can’t manage. People’s powerlessness comes from feelings that they can’t manage, and especially those that they can’t articulate. Being able to write a story around the chaos of your own narrative allows you to see yourself as a fiction, which is rather comforting because, of course, fiction can change. It’s only the facts that trap us.[[303]](#footnote-303)

The liberating quality of fiction is due to its fluid nature. In order to escape the fixed, predetermined identity people need to tell their own life stories rather than letting others narrate it. Adoption for Kay and Winterson provides the space for self-revelatory narratives and the means to tackle the hegemonic patterns of race and gender, contributing to changes in the cultural landscape and leading to more fluid personal and national borderlines.

**Chapter 5**

**Storytelling and Motherhood in Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood among Ghosts* (1975) and Amy Tan’s *The Bonesetter’s Daughter* (2001)**

The heart of this story belongs to my grandmother, its voice to my mother.

Amy Tan[[304]](#footnote-304)

1. **Introduction**

In chapter four, I explored the relationship between mothers and their adopted daughters and the significance of adoption in the formation of racial and sexual identity in autobiographical writings. In this chapter, I would like to investigate further the concept of self-definition in relation to the literary inventions of maternal figures through storytelling in the selected autobiographically based fiction of two contemporary Chinese American women writers, Maxine Hong Kingston and Amy Tan. Kingston and Tan’s writings engage with the dialectic of Chinese American identity through giving voice to Chinese migrants and their American-born children. As Wendy Ho observes in *In Her Mother's House* (1999), these narratives of Chinese American writers are a part of the critiques by many women-of-colour feminists that emerged in the 1970s and 1980s. As a response to the mainstream feminist call to recover women’s writings, these writers reclaimed their mother-daughter stories not only from masculinist traditions but also from elitist, capitalist, nationalist, and imperialist traditions’.[[305]](#footnote-305) Kingston and Tan’s works participate in the theorization of the plurality of female identity by recovering Chinese immigrants’ stories and offering narratives of mother-daughter relationships in Chinese American contexts. In *The Woman Warrior* (1975) and *The Bonesetter’s Daughter* (2001), Kingston and Tan respectively blend autobiographical stories, myths, and historical details as they attempt to depict the state of dislocation and displacement in the lives of Chinese migrant mothers and their first-generation American daughters. Their portrayal of ‘good’ mothers/grandmothers and ‘disappointing’ daughters in relation to the clash of values between generations and their use of rewritten myths in narrating the self are among the themes this chapter explores. In the works of Kingston and Tan discussed in this chapter, I argue that daughters reconstruct the stories of the past told by their mothers and grandmothers in order to create empowering narratives which give voice to Chinese and Chinese American female identities. These are not the cases where a woman understands her identity only in relation to a mother figure. Rather, these are the narratives where the daughters help their mothers to unlock and vocalize the past. In these narratives, the daughters engage in the dialogue with their mothers by retelling their stories and providing the opportunity for both to articulate and express their thoughts and experiences.

As Maxine Hong Kingston herself remarks in an interview, she writes about ‘the struggle to find a voice … a personal as well as a political voice’.[[306]](#footnote-306) Born in 1940 in Stockton, California’s Chinatown, Kingston first spoke Chinese and learnt English later in her childhood. It was her seminal novel *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts* (1975) that introduced her to the world and made her the focus of intense critical debate. Having become the most widely taught text by a living author in modern university education within a decade of its publication, it has been used in various disciplines such as American literature, Asian studies, sociology, and women's studies.[[307]](#footnote-307) Similar to *The Woman Warrior*, her following works, including *China Man* (1980) and *Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book* (1990), are versions of Kingston’s life in the US, her family’s Chinese background, and her re-imaginations of Chinese mythology narrate Chinese American identity and challenge racial and gender discriminations. In an interview, Kingston has noted that ‘fiction is a narrow place on one side and nonfiction is a narrow place on another side’, and that her stories take place in the ‘great big border in the middle’ where ‘real life’ and ‘fantasies and dreams and visions’ coexist.[[308]](#footnote-308) This hybrid nature of her narratives and her use of the unfixed borderline space to discover and challenge hegemonic patterns of race and gender echoe Homi Bhabha’s idea of hybridity as a ‘third space’ and the importance of the ‘turning of boundaries and limits into the in-between spaces through which the meanings of cultural and political authority are negotiated’.[[309]](#footnote-309) As he writes, the importance of such in-between spaces is not to ‘trace two original moments from which the third emerges’, rather it is the ‘third space’ that makes it possible for the other positions to emerge’.[[310]](#footnote-310) Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior* is a perfect example of this in-between space that gives voice to both mothers and daughters and enables the narratives of individual selfhood to emerge.

Similarly, Amy Tan centres most of her works on the issues related to the lives of Chinese Americans. Identity is the focus of most of her writings and, like Kingston, Tan sees identity as fluid and changing rather than fixed. As she observes in an interview with Gregory Morris, identity ‘is not all that clear; it’s in flux all the time, and we never know what the interaction is except in the particular moment’.[[311]](#footnote-311) Her novels examine the struggle to establish identities while exploring women’s lives in patriarchal traditions and the relationship between mothers and daughters. Tan was born in Oakland, California, two years after her parents emigrated from China to the US. Despite her parents’ wish for her to become a medical doctor, she earned a bachelor’s and master’s degree in linguistics from San Jose State University. After starting her doctoral studies and working for UC Santa Cruz, she became a writing consultant and ultimately turned to creative writing. Her first novel, *The Joy Luck Club* (1989), established her as a prominent writer with high sales and strong reviews. While Tan sees her writing material as being about themes ‘present in all cultures’,[[312]](#footnote-312) the majority of her writings draw specifically on elements of Chinese and Chinese American culture and experience. Tan, like Kingston, is a daughter-writer who gives voice to women by writing their stories as the means to confront personal and communal subjugation, and both her own mother and her creation of mother figures play an important role in her writings. Like her first novel, which focuses on mother-daughter relationships and interactions between Chinese and Chinese American generations, *The Bonesetter’s Daughter* (2001) tells the story of ruptures and contradictions resulting from differences between a Chinese mother and her American-born daughter, who is engaged in the creation of narratives of self and identity. It centres on the lives of three women – Precious Auntie or Bao Bomu (the grandmother), LuLing (the mother) and Ruth (the daughter) – and uses two narrators, mother and daughter, depicting the challenges Chinese immigrants face when dealing with their American-born children and the ways in which Chinese American daughters tackle the question of identity.

I will explore the notions of identity and mother-daughter relationship in a Chinese American context through the rest of the chapter, incorporating close reading of Tan and Kingston’s texts. As I explore the significance of mothers’ stories of the past in daughters’ narratives of identity, my examination will address Marianne Hirsch’s notion of postmemory that she describes as a ‘structure of inter- and trans-generational transmission of traumatic knowledge and experience’.[[313]](#footnote-313) I will also examine different images of mothers and mother figures created in these narratives and will argue that the stories of mothers and the daughters’ depictions of mother figures play a key role in forming identity and establishing authorship for these women.

1. **Mother-daughter Relationships and Formation of Identity**

The stories of the past, and the memories of mothers, form the centre of both Tan and Kingston’s narratives, where daughters challenge the patriarchal concepts of female identity, which are generally passed on to them through their mothers. The relationship between Chinese mothers and American-born daughters in Kingston and Tan’s novels is one of a constant clash of ideas and misinterpretation of intentions. Marianne Hirsch observes that to study the mother-daughter relationship is ‘to plunge into a network of complex ties, to attempt to untangle the strands of a double self, a continuous multiple being of monstrous proportions stretched across generations, parts of which try desperately to separate and delineate their own boundaries’.[[314]](#footnote-314) The daughters of these narratives start with their struggles to renounce their mothers’ words and experiences and to assert their independence. However, by renouncing their mothers, they renounce themselves, too, because they see parts of their mothers in themselves. Sarah Gilead argues that Kingston’s narrative ‘dramatizes a central problem in women’s quest for selfhood in the patriarchy – conflicting desires to escape the burden of traditional limits of self-concept and ways of living, yet to retain links to traditional culture and its capacity to lend historical and social significance to the self’.[[315]](#footnote-315) This dilemma of rejection and assimilation and the constant confrontation between daughters and mothers lead to their rewriting the relationship in order to gain insight into this complex web of relations and its significance.

Kingston and Tan’s works not only reflect the complications of mother-daughter relationships in patriarchal cultures, but they also shed light upon the socio-cultural misunderstandings particular to migrant families. As Wendy Ho observes, the mothers and daughters in Kingston and Tan ‘tell stories of betrayal and complicity within oppressive systems, not just about satisfactions, resistance, and empowerment’.[[316]](#footnote-316) These narratives portray women’s struggle to define autonomous female identity, while confronting the socio-economic problems in marginalized ethnic communities. Tan and Kingston not only challenge patriarchal Chinese values, but also portray the obstacles and restrictions one might face in the U.S as an immigrant. In *The Woman Warrior*, Maxine is considered to have a zero IQ in the American educational system (*WW* 183), and she is even fired by a racist employer (*WW* 49). Both works highlight the cross-cultural misinterpretation and hostility between daughters and their mothers, which is due to the former’s assimilation into the American culture in face of the latter’s insistence on imposing upon them the old Chinese culture. While mothers are narrated by daughters as interfering with and disapproving of modern American culture, daughters are pictured in the mothers’ narration as rude and disrespectful of Chinese traditions. Daughters are drawn away from their ethnic environment through school and work, and in order to adapt to the American environment and be acknowledged by it, they suspend their Chinese identity. This results in alienation from their Chinese heritage and hostility to their mothers. For example, in *The Woman Warrior*, Maxine’s involvement with American culture at school draws her away from the Chinese environment of her family, so Maxine finds Chinese immigrants’ behaviour in general and her mother’s manners in particular embarrassing: ‘The immigrants I know have loud voices, unmodulated to American tones even after years away from the village where they called their friendships out across the fields. I have not been able to stop my mother's screams in public libraries or over telephones’ (*WW* 11). Juxtaposing the rural image of China and the technological and literate one of the U.S highlights Maxine’s hostile attitude towards her Chinese mother’s mannerisms. In *The Bonesetter’s Daughter*, the conflict between the two generations is clear in the scene where LuLing is pictured trying to teach Ruth the ‘mechanics of writing Chinese’, and Ruth’s failure in learning fills LuLing with ‘disappointment and disgust’ (*BD* 49). Having been born American and wishing to affiliate with western culture, Ruth is challenged by her mother who constantly reminds her of her ancestry and expects her to appreciate her Chinese heritage. When discovered smoking and faced with her mother’s angry tirade, Ruth shouts ‘I’m an American! I have a right to privacy’ (*BD* 158). Ruth’s claim for ‘right to privacy’ represents how she has acquired American values and considers her mother’s attitude intrusive and oppressive, while LuLing considers it a mere act of parenting. Born and brought up in China, LuLing refuses to assimilate into American culture and stubbornly stands by her Chinese values and behaviours (*BD* 49). In both novels, as the narratives progress and myths and stories of the past are unravelled, daughters gain a better understanding of their mothers’ Chinese culture and become more appreciative of what those stories contribute to their present and future.

Significant parts of both Kingston and Tan’s novels draw upon ancient Chinese history and myths. These parts shed light on patriarchal values that have defined women’s racial and sexual status. Filial duty is the core of Chinese culture, where women are to obey and remain loyal to men (father, husband, and eldest son), are decreed to be chaste and courteous, and are to be expert in needlework and tapestry.[[317]](#footnote-317) Tan’s depiction of Precious Auntie, the fact that she cannot talk, has no voice, and only uses her eyes and hand gestures to communicate, is telling about women’s social stance:

I was a fire-eater, she said with her hands and eyes. Hundreds of people came to see me in the market square. Into the burning pot of my mouth I dropped raw pork, added chilis and bean paste, stirred this up, then offered the morsels to people to taste. If they said, ‘Delicious!’ I opened my mouth as a purse to catch copper coins. One day, however, I ate the fire, and the fire came back, and it ate me. After that, I decided not to be a cook-pot anymore, so I became your nursemaid instead. (*BD* 3)

This is an allegorical account of Precious Auntie’s life and the incident that left her burnt and mute. She imagines herself preparing food in her mouth, instead of a pot. To portray her as a cook-pot is to represent women’s role in Chinese society where a wife is associated with cooking. She is the source of nourishment for family and her body is consumed in an exploitative manner. The copper coins refer to the fact that her existence is only valued if she performs the duties ascribed to her by patriarchy. The fact that Precious Auntie speaks with her ‘hands’ and ‘eyes’ and has no voice confirms the patriarchal notion of womanhood that is limited to her body and its use and according to which her opinions are of no value. Kingston here depicts the relation between sexist suppression and the lack of speech.[[318]](#footnote-318) So this passage critiques the fact that under patriarchal systems, women’s life and their social status is reduced to the domestic duties of giving birth and caring for the family. Since Precious Auntie is not considered suitable for marriage due to her deformed face and figure, she has no other choice than to become a nursemaid.

In Kingston and Tan’s narratives, images of mother figures in the past in China do not match the daughters’ perception of their real mothers in the present U.S. These stories provide the daughters with independent, powerful mother figures with whom they can identify and through which they can understand the socio-cultural setting of their actual mothers’ lives in the past China. In *The Woman Warrior*, the Brave Orchid whose uneasiness about ‘ghosts’ is even passed on to the children in the U.S has little resemblance to the Brave Orchid who confronts and defeats the Sitting Ghost in the medical college back in China: ‘I am brave and good. Also I have bodily strength and control. Good people do not lose to ghosts’ (*WW* 86). Although daughters initially view their mothers through a westernized lens which does not allow any understanding or identification, storytelling provides them with the means to reconstruct their ancestral heritage and allows them to acknowledge their mothers’ choices and actions. For example, in *The Bonesetter’s Daughter*, Ruth believes that her mother’s dementia and her odd behaviours are related to a real mental disability, because she is judging her according to western logic. Liu LuLing, Ruth’s mother, is an expert in the arts and wants her daughter to inherit that knowledge; hence, she tries to teach her and is ‘[t]he whole time stuffing Chinese logic into her resistant brain’ (*BD* 49), as Ruth narrates. Ruth initially fails to realize that her mother‘s behaviour belongs to a different era and culture and would make sense if set in its own context, but she acknowledges that with Chinese words, ‘her mother did make sense’, and that unlike her usual self, she was different when she was writing and painting: she was ‘calm, organized, and decisive’ (*BD* 47).

In these narratives, the bond between generations, which is broken in the beginning, is restored only when mothers and daughters participate in a dialogue and communicate through the stories that transmit memories of the past and create narratives of selfhood for both of them. Marianne Hirsch, in her book *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative, and Postmemory* (1997), introduces the concept of postmemory examining the influence of the memories of the past on the identity of following generations through the developments of these memories into stories: ‘Postmemory characterizes the experience of those who grow up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth, whose own belated stories are evacuated by the stories of the previous generation shaped by traumatic events that can be neither understood nor recreated’.[[319]](#footnote-319) Although Hirsch introduces the theory of postmemory in relation to the children of Holocaust survivors, she adds that it can address other second-generation memories of cultural or collective experiences.[[320]](#footnote-320) This notion of postmemory can be applied to Kingston and Tan’s texts, where mothers’ past experiences are transferred to their daughters through the mothers’ narratives, assisting them to form and establish their hybrid narratives.

Kingston states that her work breaks the silence and gives voice to the people who have tried to forget and deny their history: ‘We have this amnesia … that’s the silence. And we have to constantly be awake and remember our history. In every culture there are all those strictures that say your voice is not your own, don’t create yourself with your words. So, I guess in all of my work … there is this struggle against silence’.[[321]](#footnote-321) Memory and history are primarily passed to younger generations through stories and personal/oral narrations in Chinese culture. Therefore, if one generation decides to omit one section of history, it will be difficult to revive it for the younger generation. Maxine’s mother expects her to forget and not tell: ‘My mother says that we, like the ghosts, have no memories’ (*WW* 151). As Marianne Hirsch and Valerie Smith argue, ‘What a culture remembers and what it chooses to forget are intricately bound up with issues of power and hegemony, and thus with gender’.[[322]](#footnote-322) The first sentence of *The Woman Warrior*, ‘You must not tell’, signifies the importance of Kingston’s legacy in breaking the silence and speaking of the story no one was supposed to tell. As Kingston writes later in the narrative, ‘talking and not talking made the difference between sanity and insanity’ (*WW* 216). To narrate women’s memories of the past and the gender discrimination they face in patriarchal society challenges the hegemonic definitions of identity. To retell the forgotten stories is to reinstate the denied existences.

Kingston and Tan’s mothers and daughters are usually situated in the domestic sphere, where they struggle to articulate the social spaces for themselves and for their relations. As they depict the overlap of two cultures and its effect on the mother-daughter relationship, they both narrate the stories from mother and daughter’s point of views. The mothers’ life stories and the daughters’ reconstruction of those stories give voice to the two driving forces of the narratives. The writers’ use of dual narrators in these novels represents self and other, the daughter and the mother, who are linked and separated through their stories. It also represents the fact that neither generation’s narratives is accurate, and that it is essential to know both in order to understand their narratives of identities. Daughters in these texts crisscross the borders and differences between generations, cultures, and languages in order to access their mothers’ stories out of which they can construct their own hybrid narratives. The emergence of such a hybrid narrative, as Bhabha argues in his discussion of in-betweenness, ‘displaces the histories that constitute it’ and sets up new ‘structures of authority’ and ‘political initiatives’.[[323]](#footnote-323) Kingston and Tan’s narratives bear traces of the stories of mothers and daughters, China and the U.S; however, they construct ‘a new area of negotiation of meaning and representation’[[324]](#footnote-324) through which the traditional, patriarchal past is reconciled with contemporary American life.

1. **Maternal Narratives and the Creation of Mother Figures**

In *The Woman Warrior* and *The Bonesetter’s Daughter*, transmission of memories is a key element in daughters’ self-definition; however, this does not nullify woman’s independent identity. These two narratives are designed around the repetition of stories that create an in-between space shared by both mother and daughter where their experiences of postmemory are explored. By giving voice to their silenced mothers and through telling their mothers’ narratives, daughters adopt and integrate their mothers’ stories into their own narrations of identity. Tan explains in her novel that ‘two ghostwriters came to [her] assistance during the last draft’ of the novel: ‘The heart of this story belongs to my grandmother, its voice to my mother’ (*BD* 5). She clarifies the notion of ghosts, explaining that the help she gained while writing the novel came from a force greater than herself: from ‘a continuous consciousness and a form of love’.[[325]](#footnote-325) The images of the mother figures created are partly real and partly fictional. In response to a question in an interview about whether Ruth and LuLing are autobiographical, Tan replies: ‘No, they’re not based on anyone outside of myself and my mother but they are also not based that closely on me and circumstance’.[[326]](#footnote-326) Similarly, Kingston brings fact and fiction together in her works, writing ‘biography and autobiography of imaginative people’, writing about ‘real people, all of whom have minds that love to invent fiction’, and writing ‘the biography of their imaginations’.[[327]](#footnote-327) The border between autobiography and fiction is where Tan and Kingston create the empowering images of mother-figures who inspire daughters to exert their own identity.

Kingston’s narrative, incorporating memoir, novel, fact and fantasy, is composed of multiple voices representing her fluid notion of self and identity as incorporation of one’s community and culture rather than an isolated individual. This collision of different narratives and use of multiple narrators reflects Virginia Woolf’s style in *A Room of One’s Own*, where there are many quotations from other texts and the narrator speaks from the position of many women: ‘Call me Mary Beton, Mary Seton, Mary Carmichael or any other name you please—it is not a matter of importance’.[[328]](#footnote-328) In the course of Woolf’s text, the stories of different women collide and all form Woolf’s grand narrative, where she makes sense of her own identity through narrating other women’s experiences. Although in autobiographically based narratives the self is supposed to be the focus of the narrative, Kingston writes about other women because her ‘relation to other people’ is essential in her way of perceiving herself.[[329]](#footnote-329) Therefore, she displaces the self by telling the stories of others using different point of views and creating a writing style that ‘has many layers, as human beings have layers’.[[330]](#footnote-330) *The Woman Warrior* starts with the story of an aunt told by the mother rather than Maxine who is the main narrator. This is the story through which her mother tries to bring the obligations of kinship to bear on Maxine’s life and teach her that if she follows her aunt’s path of bringing shame to the family by having illegitimate children, she will be cut off from her identity as the villagers cut her aunt from their community and her family deliberately forgot her and pretended she never existed. Maxine narrates, ‘I could not figure out what was my village’ (*WW* 45); in other words, the sense of identity her mother tries to inscribe in her does not apply to Maxine since she does not see herself part of that time/ place or community. So through her own writing, Maxine creates her personal narration of who she is and what she wants.

Kingston’s narrative suggests that to read, explore, and narrate other women’s experiences helps widen daughters’ perception of the world and themselves. Kingston’s legendary heroine, Fa Mu Lan, after getting trained by her tutors, is finally able to see a vision where people of different times and races come together and help her realize what life means:

I saw two people made of gold dancing the earth’s dances. They turned so perfectly that together they were the axis of the earth’s turning. They were light; they were molten, changing gold – Chinese lion dancers, African lion dancers in midstep. I heard high Javanese bells deepen in midring to Indian bells, Hindu Indian, American Indian. Before my eyes, gold bells shredded into gold tassels that fanned into two royal capes that softened into lions’ fur. Manes grew tall into feathers that shone – became light rays. Then the dancers danced the future – a machine-future – in clothes I had never seen before. (*WW* 32)

This vision is one of unity, where people and cultures all contribute to the turning of the earth’s axis and are all equally of high value and ‘made of gold’. The fact that the cultures named in the vision are all neither white nor western might also imply the fact that the minorities, who were not well-represented in literary narratives, now get the chance to show their contribution to this unity. Kingston’s narration, just like Fa Mu Lan’s vision, stretches one’s imagination and brings multiple views together in her narration in order to imply that in order to understand one’s individuality, one needs to understand the community. Responding to a question about the role of reading and writing in the expansion and transformation of the self, Kingston explains the process through which, by enlarging one’s imagination, one can become able to identify different aspects and responsibilities of the self: ‘first there isan awareness of the ego, the self, and then of another and many others to become a communal person. And we need to go even beyond that – our family, tribe, Chinatown, gang, nation – into a larger selflessness or agape’.[[331]](#footnote-331) So in Kingston’s narratives, to expand the scope of vision and imagination is the fundamental step to develop an individual self into an inclusive sense of identity. Fa Mu Lan’s words express Kingston’s belief in a sense of truth that allows for paradoxes in her narration of dragons: ‘I learned to make my mind large, as the universe is large, so that there is room for paradoxes… The dragon lives in the sky, ocean, marshes, and mountains… Its voice thunders and jingles like copper pans. It breathes fire and water; and sometimes the dragon is one, sometimes many’ (*WW* 29). As Fa Mu Lan learns to see beyond the limits and encompass all the differences, only then can she create the ideograph ‘human’ (*WW* 23) and become the embodiment of humanity representing herself and others beyond racial or gender boundaries.

Due to her recreations of Chinese myths and her different depictions of ancient Chinese legends, Kingston has faced fierce critiques, mainly from Chinese and Chinese American communities. Her critics not only claim that her books do not reflect ‘the experiences of a majority of the Chinese American community’, but they also argue that she misrepresents ‘the Chinese mythologies’, particularly the stories of Fa Mu Lan and Ts’ai Yen’.[[332]](#footnote-332) As for the first criticism, Kingston has never tried to generalize regarding the Chinese American experience, and as the title of the narrative suggests, these are the memoirs of a girl and how she remembers her life as a Chinese American woman. As for the accusation of her manipulation of Chinese myths, Kingston has her own interpretation of the role of myths and memory. She accepts that she changes them because she has no intention of just recording the myths, but aims rather to recreate and reinterpret them as a means of resistance. For example, her decision to change Fa Mu Lan’s legend was calculated, because as a part of her feminist endeavours, she decides to take away a patriarchal story of male power and give the strength of that story to women. Kingston criticises the sinologists who attacked her for ‘not knowing’ and ‘distorting’ myths and explains that those who expect her to ‘correct’ and ‘revise’ her myths are in fact asking her to ‘conform’ to the traditional Chinese version, because they do not realise that ‘myths have to change, be useful or be forgotten’.[[333]](#footnote-333) While it is a hero, ‘Ngak Fei the patriot’, whose parents cut vows on his back in the Chinese myth, Kingston ‘takes his power for women’, by creating the heroine, Fa Mu Lan, in her narrative and has the words cut into her back.[[334]](#footnote-334) In fact, what Kingston is accused of – the distortion of Chinese myths – is what makes the myths relevant to her narration. While the original myth, where the champion is male, would be a truthful narration of the story, it would fail in representing the truth Kingston’s narrative aims at introducing. It is not the myth but Maxine’s creation of the myth that provides her with the mother-figure Fa Mu Lan with whom she identifies: a strong woman who, despite her gender and class, becomes the hero of her community.

In her 'no name aunt' story, Kingston likewise tries to empower the aunt through her narrative by offering alternative readings of her fate. As Maxine acknowledges, for a long time she believed and accepted her mother's narration and justification: 'I have believed that sex was unspeakable... I have thought that my family, having settled among immigrants who had also been their neighbors in the ancestral land, needed to clean their name... But there is more to this silence: they want me to participate in her punishment. And I have' (*WW* 18). Maxine feels guilty because the fact that she has also kept silent has made her an accomplice in her family’s unjustified punishment of the aunt. By imagining her aunt as a willful, transgressive woman rather than a victim, Kingston portrays this model of female self-representation whose manner of life and death challenges the patriarchal norm, contaminates the family well, and subverts the stability of patriarchal values. Having placed her aunt in an alternative narrative, Kingston creates the mother figure with whom she can identify.

As Ya-jie Zhang observes in her response to the novel, Kingston’s purpose is ‘to make use of all these stories to show how a Chinese-American finds her identity, how much she has to struggle through – the old culture as well as the new – and how she uses words and stories to rebel against the old and to contribute to the new’.[[335]](#footnote-335) In rewriting the myth of Fa Mu Lan so she can lead her people in successful battles as well as give birth, Kingston portrays a woman who is very different from the women in real life. While her version of Fa Mu Lan can be at once a filial wife/mother and a heroic warrior, her real life examples of women, such as the forgotten aunt, are far from perfect, and Fa Mu Lan does not fit them. Having realized the difference between her fate and Fa Mu Lan’s, Maxine narrates: ‘No bird called me, no wise old people tutored me. I have no magic beads, no water gourd sight, no rabbit that will jump in the fire when I’m hungry’ (*WW* 49). Maxine is aware that reality can be very different from myth, so she tells herself that she must not ‘feel bad’ that she could not do ‘as well as the swordswoman did’ (*WW* 49). It seems that at first her mother’s stories offer no sense of empowerment and leave her questions unanswered. However, it is her narration of the stories that provides her with the means to challenge her sense of victimization. Kingston talks about Fa Mu Lan’s vengeance and suggests that what links her and the narrator are the ‘words’ that are the means for their revenge:

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

Fa Mu Lan’s story and the words on her back are metaphors for the narrator’s act of writing. Maxine finds out that her reality is not ‘too dissimilar’ to the myth: as Fa Mu Lan knew her enemies and took vengeance by her sword, Maxine fights racial and sexual discriminations and takes revenge by words and through reporting the crimes, as she does with the narrating the story of her aunt and revealing her oppression. Their commitment to community and the power of the ‘words’ or language connect the myth and the real life story and contribute to the creation of narratives, which give voice to daughters and their mothers and mother figures. Having brought together ancient Chinese stories, her mother’s stories, her own life in the US, and her imagination, Kingston brings to life a daring and rebellious woman warrior who challenges both old and new and creates her own narrative of survival.

According to Chinese patriarchal values, women are expected to be modest and reticent, and mothers are expected to pass down these values to their daughters. This maternal ‘duty’ is reflected in Brave Orchid’s teachings to her daughter in *The Woman Warrior*. Brave Orchid is an authoritarian, oppressive mother who tries, by telling stories, to teach her daughter the Chinese behaviour for a woman, warning her not to ‘humiliate’ her family as her ‘no name aunt’ did. As Sidonie Smith observes, Kingston's mother tries to preserves ‘the traditions that authorize the old way of life and enable her to reconstitute the circle of the immigrant community amidst an alien environment’; hence, she ‘dominates the life, the landscape, and the language of the text as she dominates the subjectivity of the daughter who writes that text’.[[336]](#footnote-336) The cautionary tale of the 'no name aunt' who brought shame to her family is intended to infuse in the daughter subservient female values; however, the fact that the mother tells the story that it is forbidden to tell itself sends the message of rebellion against those values. Brave Orchid consistently tells her daughter, ‘Don’t let your father know that I told you’ (*WW* 5), but the legacy of powerful stories is handed down and the daughter understands the significance of the words: ‘I have believed that … words [were] so strong and fathers so frail that “aunt” would do my father some mysterious harm’ (*WW* 15). The daughter complains at some point that she is tired of her mother’s stories and does not want to listen anymore because ‘they have no logic. They scramble me up… I can’t tell what’s real and what you make up’ (*WW* 202). Nevertheless, this logic is ultimately validated by Kingston herself, who in her narrative mixes fact and fiction, mythology and autobiography, in order to represent the significance of distrusting received ‘truth’ and challenging patriarchal values.

Although Brave Orchid says that to raise geese is more profitable than to raise girls and that girls can grow up to be just wives and slaves, she gives her daughter the means of survival by singing to her the legend of Fa Mu Lan and teaching her the song of the warrior woman (*WW* 20). Brave Orchid’s voice, commanding and reiterating filial obligations, is also the voice that sings to her daughter about female power and authority. She exorcises the ghost that haunts the medical school building while everyone is else is overcome and paralysed by fear. Having insulted the ghost as being ‘lame and lazy’, she tells the ghost ‘You have no power over a strong woman’ (*WW* 70). Her voice precedes Maxine’s in her narrative, signifying the mother’s significant role in the daughter’s understanding of her identity. Brave Orchid provides the independent female role model and the pioneer for her daughter: she is the first woman in her family to have sought a profession of her own and is the first who managed to be independent of men. It is her storytelling that provides her daughter with narratives of mother's and daughter's identities in the patriarchal context. Figuratively speaking, it was Brave Orchid who helped her daughter speak other languages easily by cutting her frenulum. Kingston’s mother is the source of her empowerment and inspiration. She is the link between Kingston’s ancestral consciousness and her own imagination, providing her with the stories through which she writes herself. According to Hirsch, postmemory defines ‘the relationship of the second generation to the experiences of the first – their curiosity and desire, as well as their ambivalences about wanting to own their parents’ knowledge’.[[337]](#footnote-337) Kingston, through her depiction of mother-daughter relationship, demonstrates the key role of storytelling in re-establishing the dialogue between generations and depicts the impact of the knowledge of mothers’ past on the daughters’ narratives.

The daughters in Kingston and Tan’s narratives thus seek to establish a relationship with their maternal ancestors through the stories of the past and are positioned as mediators or translators between their mothers’ stories and the outside world. Hirsch mainly focuses on photography as a medium of postmemory in her analyses; however, autobiographical writings can be equally valid mediums to transfer memories as photos, if not more so. In another book, *Ghosts of Home: The Afterlife of Czernowitz in Jewish Memory*, which she co-authored, she states that these archives ‘have a memory of their own that they bring to us from the past; that that memory tells us something about ourselves, about what/how we and those who preceded us once were; that they carry not only information about the past, but enable us to reach an emotional register’.[[338]](#footnote-338) To pass down the personal and emotional connection to the past and to provide the following generation with matrilineal heritage is at the heart of Kingston and Tan’s narratives.

The fact that Maxine insists on writing the story that her mother told her not to tell and also that she imagines a more positive story for her aunt represents Kingston’s effort in creating a ‘translation of her aunt’s life that crosses the borders between the Chinese injunction to be silent about this shameful suicide and her American need for a myth of ancestral strength’.[[339]](#footnote-339) Here her aunt is the mother figure, which is functioning in part figuratively as a representation of the place of origin. She does not need the story of a victimized aunt to help her reach for her Chinese roots; rather, she needs an empowered narrative of her aunt, a strong maternal figure, who can offer her both the ancestral tie and the modern feminist role model. Kingston becomes an intermediary between Chinese myths and American culture, between her parents’ experience as immigrants and her own youth as an American-born daughter. She explains in an interview: ‘I was trying to find an American language that would translate the speech of the people who are living their lives with the Chinese language. They carry on their adventures and their emotional life and everything in Chinese. I had to find a way to translate all that into a graceful American language’.[[340]](#footnote-340) The last sentence of the novel reads: ‘It translated well’ (*WW* 243). This sentence refers to the song Ts’ai Yen has composed in captivity. Having been abducted and forced to live far from her homeland, she is inspired by the sound of her abductors’ flutes and composes a song about deprivation and yearning. She takes her songs with her when she goes back to China where people sing them ‘to their own instruments’ (*WW* 243). Just like Ts’ai’s song, Kingston’s hybrid narrative, inhabiting the in-between space, transcends the boundaries and ambiguities and connects the two traditions of Western literature and Chinese myths, creating a narrative of Chinese American identity.

The emotional centre of Tan and Kingston’s writings is a mother figure who, despite her displacement in the modern foreign world, embodies the history of her people and symbolises the ancient wisdom and speech giving voice to the women in her family or community. The mother’s memories become the daughter’s postmemory, which, although cannot be recalled by the daughter, has an essential influence on her development of individuality due to her intense relationship with her mother. *The Bonesetter’s Daughter* (2001), emphasizing the importance of mothers’ role in daughters’ quest for self-definition, spans three generations. These stories create an intergenerational space of memory and provide a dialogue between the daughters and their mothers, helping the former appreciate the socio-cultural context of their mothers’ narrations and the latter to gain a better understanding of their own past.

Just as Brave Orchid is portrayed as an educated, independent woman in *The Woman Warrior* when set in old China, in contrast to the illogical, unreasonable, ridiculous, and at times embarrassing mother portrayed in the US where she cannot even speak a ‘proper’ English, LuLing in *The Bonesetter’s Daughter* is also represented as a respectable, rational persona when set within the context of old China, where she is considered an intellectual as well as a master of ancient Chinese arts. LuLing is diagnosed as suffering from dementia in the US and her daughter Ruth, unable to understand LuLing’s beliefs and behaviour, wishes her mother would not ‘talk about ghosts or bad luck or ways she might die’ (*BD* 52). Nevertheless, in her memories of the past in China, LuLing is transformed into a powerful character, appreciated for her wise judgments and trusted by her family and friends. The women at the centre of Tan’s novels give shape to their lives through narratives that provide them with a way not only to organize their experiences, but also to pass on those experiences to other women of their families whose lives have been deliberately or unintentionally affected by the aggregated power of those experiences.[[341]](#footnote-341) LuLing’s stories help Ruth to understand her better and appreciate her own Chinese heritage, by creating the powerful, wise mother figures she can identify with.

Tan, like Kingston, allows her characters to use storytelling as the means to relate their histories, shaping and making sense of their life narratives. As in Kingston’s case, it is Tan’s mother’s natural talent of storytelling that is reflected in her gift of weaving multiple stories with various narrators in her books. According to Tan, her mother was a ‘wonderful storyteller, for observation of character, emotional truth and passion’ and it was her stories that provided Tan with the powerful and haunting images in her novels.[[342]](#footnote-342) In Tan’s novels, narrating stories of the past helps her characters to communicate and transfer their old self and culture to the present. After learning her mother’s story, a new awareness develops and encourages Ruth to appreciate her own heritage: ‘Ruth had once thought Chinese was limited in its sounds and thus confusing. It seemed to her now that its multiple meanings made it very rich’ (*BD* 398). After reading her mother’s manuscript, Ruth can finally understand the roots of her mother’s behaviour and her obsession with the memories of her grandmother, and wants to tell LuLing ‘I’m sorry and I forgive you too’ when she apologises and asks for her daughter’s forgiveness (*BD* 353). Empowered by the values inherited from her Chinese ancestors and the autonomy acquired living in the US, she manages to repair her disappointing life and bond with her mother. In her discussion of Tan’s novel, Lisa Dunick argues that this ‘novel’s intense focus on the literary quality of women’s writing may allow us to recognize that literacy in the form of writing and written texts represents an important and often more effective means of transmitting cultural memories and cultural identity across generational lines’.[[343]](#footnote-343) Tan’s narratives give voice to the Chinese immigrant women and offer them the means of writing themselves, hence Tan’s use of non-standard English in her texts. Lu Ling’s sentences are usually lacking in grammar and vocabulary: ‘Secret not just mean cannot say. Can be hurt-you kinda secret, or curse-you kind, maybe do you damage forever, never can change after that’ (*BD* 13). In her essay ‘Mother Tongue’, Tan explains that the reason she portrays her mother speaking in ‘broken’ English is that she ‘wanted to capture what language ability tests can never reveal: her intent, her passion, her imagery, the rhythms of her speech and the nature of her thoughts’.[[344]](#footnote-344) Tan attempts to demonstrate that her Chinese mother’s command of English does not reflect her fundamental literacy and the original authorship she establishes in her autobiography. Instead, her mother’s ‘Chinglish’ becomes a language through which her ideas can be transported and her identity can be made.[[345]](#footnote-345)

In Tan’s novel, as the title suggests, the imagery of bones is crucial in interconnecting different themes including the mother-daughter relationship as well as emotional and physical healing. Bones symbolize inheritance and genetic connection in a family and they provide shape and support while allowing movement and flexibility in an organ. Bones can break but they can also grow and heal, in this way symbolizing both death and life. The narrative is replete with images of bone. As Precious Auntie tries to safeguard her family’s bones in a secret cave, LuLing is obsessed with Precious Auntie’s bones after her death, because they were never properly buried. Not only are bones ‘instruments of healing, such as the dragon bones used as medicine’, but also they are ‘vehicles for communication, such as the oracle bones used to speak with the gods’. They are ‘keys to understanding the past’ such as fossils, too.[[346]](#footnote-346) Precious Auntie’s bones were thrown into an abyss that became her grave, which is lost just like her real name and identity. Although her physical skeleton cannot be recovered, Tan’s narrative brings her back to life through the restoration of her name and her identity. Broken bones symbolize the broken relationship between mothers and daughters, while signifying its capacity to be healed. Bao Bomu, LuLing, and Ruth and their stories become one as old stories of broken bones shape the new story of recovered relationships and names. Remembering the essence of her roots and fusing the stories of three generations of women, Ruth achieves the healing power of writing:

[Ruth’s] laptop becomes a sand tray. Ruth is six years old again… her broken arm healed, her other hand holding a chopstick, ready to divine the words. Bao Bomu comes, as always, and sits next to her… ‘Think about your intentions,’ Bao Bomu says… And side by side, Ruth and her grandmother… have become the same person… They write of a past that can be changed… They can choose not to hide it, to take what’s broken, to feel the pain and know that it will heal. (*BD* 352-53)

As Kingston embeds multiple stories into her narrative and encircles each with another, she concludes where she started and with her mother’s attempt to make contact with Precious Auntie’s ghost, when LuLing tells Ruth: ‘Here, do this. Close your eyes, turn your face to heaven, and speak to her. Wait for her answer, then write it down’ (*BD* 77). Ruth, who was a ghostwriter for other people’s books, gains strength from the stories her mother LuLing and her grandmother Bao Bomu (known as Precious Auntie) have left for her. The bone imagery here suggests both heritage and healing as Ruth integrates her mother and grandmother’s stories in order to rework the past into a new narrative that heals the wounds of three generations.

For Ruth, to read her mother’s narration of her relationship with Precious Auntie helps her to understand and acknowledge her own relationship with LuLing. Ruth learns about the hostile relationship between LuLing and Precious Auntie and finds out that even when LuLing was told that the family she wanted to marry into murdered Precious Auntie’s father and husband, LuLing declined her mother’s advice, stating ‘it’s not for you to decide’ (*BD* 236). She refused to read her mother’s letter, discarding it as unimportant:

I looked at the first page, ‘I was born the daughter of the Famous Bonesetter from the Mouth of the Mountain,’ it began. I glanced through the next few pages. They concerned the tradition of her family, the loss of her mother, the grief of her father, all the things she had already told me. And then I saw where it said: ‘Now I will tell how bad this man Chang really is.’ Right away, I threw those pages down. I did not want Precious Auntie poisoning my mind anymore. (*BD* 239-240)

What helps Ruth relate to and understand her mother are LuLing and Precious Auntie’s stories, since they provide Ruth with a new perspective to look at her own life and her relationship with her mother. As LuLing initially deprives her mother of her voice by not reading the letter, Ruth finds her mother’s Chinese memoir hard and time-consuming to ‘decipher’ (*BD* 13). Nonetheless, Tan’s narrative gives voice to the silenced mothers and contributes to their authorship and matrilineal heritage. LuLing inherits the ability to write her story through Precious Auntie’s ‘secret family recipe’ to make ink (*BD* 178), and it is LuLing’s story that inspires Ruth to write the one of her own. Before she was a ghost-writer, writing for others, ‘she never had a reason to write for herself… Now she has that reason’ (*BD* 401). She reconnects with her matrilineal heritage and forms her self-definition by writing a story ‘for her grandmother, for herself, for the little girl who became her mother’ (*BD* 403).

1. **Conclusion**

An important aspect of the two novels discussed in this chapter is their particular devotion to mothers’ memories. Significant parts of the works are set in China’s past and relate the events and incidents that happened long ago. Representing a past era of human history as well as acting as a reminder for the future, these works seem to offer an alternative vision of the present reality and a possible solution for the principal conflicts in the narratives that centre round mother-daughter relationships. In their attempts to make sense of the their mothers’ stories, the daughters give voice to the unheard Chinese immigrant mothers/grandmothers/aunts who are marginalized in both old China and modern America, as well as shaping their own sense of identity. The Chinese mother figures created in these narratives provide the daughters with the matrilineal heritage that can empower them, while daughters seek to position themselves in response to their mothers’ narrations of the past. This dialogue between the two generations provides the space for exploration of independent identities. It is through telling their stories that mothers convey their aspirations, skills, and race, class, and gender awareness to the daughters, and as the mothers’ histories act as a precursor or ‘a story of origin’ to that of their daughters’,[[347]](#footnote-347) the daughters build upon and develop those stories in order to construct their own hybrid narratives of selfhood. Such narratives avoid the trap of binary thinking, since neither the mother’s narratives nor the daughters’ are considered as prior or sovereign. Rather, as Bhabha argues in his discussion of the ‘third space, they produce ‘a culture which both articulates difference and lives with it’,[[348]](#footnote-348) creating narratives in which mothers and daughters, ancient and modern, and fact and fiction are reconciled.

**Conclusions and Ways Forward**

Motherhood cannot be bound by one single definition as it is replete with unlimited, inexhaustible possibilities and potentialities; however, it has been defined and squeezed into narrow confining theories by patriarchal systems through history. As Patricia Hill Collins argues:

Varying placement in systems of privilege, whether race, class, sexuality, or age, generates divergent experiences with motherhood; therefore, examination of motherhood and mother-as-subject from multiple perspectives should uncover rich textures of difference. Shifting the centre to accommodate this diversity promises to recontextualize motherhood and point us toward feminist theorizing that embraces difference as an essential part of commonality.[[349]](#footnote-349)

Theories of motherhood will stay limited until the diversity of the mothering experiences is acknowledged. These experiences differ depending on factors such as class, sexuality, social status, or ethnicity, and it is the interconnection between motherhood and these factors that creates so many different variations and practices of mothering and constitutes the complex reality of women’s lives as mothers or daughters. In order to decentralize theories of motherhood, minority groups and under-represented communities need to be included in mothering studies, so that these theories can represent the multitude and diversity of the maternal experiences shared by women all around the world. Through this thesis, combining comparative analysis with other modes and approaches, I set out to deconstruct singular, male-defined constructions of mothering and to explore women’s narrations of class, race, or gender through narratives of mother-daughter relationships. The narratives studied here celebrate female bonding and contribute to the deconstruction of misogynist myths through construction of strong maternal identities and mother-daughter relationships. Nonetheless, I also address the ways in which women have participated in reinforcing gendered hegemonic standards by internalizing patriarchal views, which have resulted in representations of mothers who are far from nurturing figures. Mother/daughter-personas and their relationships with other women represented in this study challenge Eurocentric, heterosexist patterns and depict how women’s narratives of the maternal are informed by their socio-cultural positions. This thesis’ attempt to explore these narratives opens up opportunities for further studies of some of the terrains in mothering studies that are yet to be fully explored and on which I will elaborate in this section.

I opened up my discussion of motherhood through analysing an Iranian film’s narration of mothering in the Introduction, since film has been a key site in exploring women’s lives and the related socio-cultural anxieties, particularly in regard to the ways women balance 'motherhood, work, and their positions as sexual beings’.[[350]](#footnote-350) In the last century, Hollywood films have not only revealed the constraints of race, class, and gender on women through their portrayals of mothers in American society, but also, due to the wider audience they have compared to more independent cinemas of the world, they have adhered to dominant discourses of motherhood by constructing visions of ‘ideal’ motherhood. Classical Hollywood was profoundly influenced by Freudian theory. David Greven observes, ‘narratives of femininity in classical myth, Freudian psychoanalysis, and Hollywood film are analogous mythologies, abstract versions of the social and cultural conditions that produce gender and sexual identities, which in turn shape these productions’.[[351]](#footnote-351) Like literary canons, which represent patriarchal narrations of maternal experiences, classical mainstream cinema portrays stereotypical images of the mother and her relationship with other women, at times reflecting Freudian theories on femininity and mother-daughter relationships which involve hegemonic, confining constructions of identity for women. For instance Greven argues that in Hitchcock’s films, Freud and his theories of ‘[p]hallic women, narcissistic women, fetishism, male desire for the ideal, the fusion of sex and death, misogyny as the inevitable result of male castration anxiety’ are present everywhere.[[352]](#footnote-352) Freud’s theory of children’s pre-Oedipal desire for the mother and how boys keep this object of desire as they undergo the Oedipus complex while girls turn to their father are reflected in phallocentric representations of the maternal that prevail in popular culture. As E. Ann Kaplan observes in *Motherhood and Representation: the Mother in Popular Culture and Melodrama* (1992) any early female bond or identification with the mother is not possible according to the Freudian scheme. Kaplan sets three paradigms for motherhood in twentieth century popular film and fiction: ‘the all sacrificing “angel in the house”, the over-indulgent mother, satisfying her own needs, and finally the evil, possessive, and destructive all-devouring one’.[[353]](#footnote-353)

Some of the more recent and independent films have tackled and challenged such male-defined narratives of motherhood and have contributed to representing the diversity of maternal experiences, one of which is Patricia Cardoso’s *Real Women Have Curves*’ (2010) that depicts the mother-daughter relationship in the context of race/ethnicity, gender, and class issues in the Latino community of Los Angeles. The film’s portrayal of the relationship between the immigrant mother, Carmen, and her American-born daughter, Ana, provides a new argument about mothering that, as Ma Nan argues, ‘goes beyond the binary constructions of the mother as either a mouthpiece for patriarchal values from whom the daughter wishes to dissociate herself or as a victim of patriarchal ideologies’: ‘Carmen is a complex character whose identity is formed at the intersections of multiple categories of identification (woman, immigrant, working class, middle aged, mother), and she actively negotiates her subjectivity as a mother’.[[354]](#footnote-354) Like contemporary fiction, Betty Jay argues, films that represent marginalised and misrepresented sub-cultures such as Chinese American, African American, or white, Southern underclass not only ‘reflect the contemporary concern with the formation of racial and cultural identities’, they are also ‘important in terms of the history of the representation of the mother-daughter relationship’: films such as *Beloved* (1998) or *Bastard out of Carolina* (1996), ‘in addition to redressing an historical imbalance when it comes to representations of race and class, insist on the centrality of the mother-daughter relationship to the project of developing a discursive and symbolic account of female identity’.[[355]](#footnote-355)

Iranian film, although neglected and sometimes misrepresented by film critics, has also contributed to developing a diverse account of female identity and the maternal. Traditionally, Iranian popular culture has represented gendered cultural standards and has played a role in constructing misogynistic views of femininity that render women powerless. The one-dimensional image of the mother portrayed in Hatami’s *Madar*, although romantic, elegant, and nostalgic, reflected its creator’s failure in grasping the tension between ‘real’ Iranian mothers’ experiences of mothering and the conventional patriarchal notion of motherhood. Theorising and understanding mothering and motherhood continues to remain partial, as Collins notes, until ‘we distinguish between what has been said about subordinated groups in the dominant discourse, and what such groups might say about themselves if given the opportunity’.[[356]](#footnote-356) Since *Madar*, there have been many socially engaged films that give voice to women and depict the daily challenges they face in contemporary Iranian society. Bahram Beizai is one of the most distinguished Iranian filmmakers whose films explore Iran’s socio-cultural issues. His *Killing Rabids* (2001), set in the years following the Iran-Iraq war, reveals the socio-economic condition of the time, while focusing on women’s situation in those hard years and their vulnerability in a society ruled by patriarchal values. Marziyeh Meshkini’s *The Day I became a Woman* (2000) is a more direct criticism of women’s situation in Iran and their struggle for identity. It consists of the stories of three women in different stages of life: a young girl, a married woman, and an elderly woman. One can argue that these stories are interconnected and in fact represent the narratives of childhood, youth, and old age of Iranian women. Hava, Ahu, and Hura are all struggling against the patriarchal standards that dictate their selfhood narratives. Hamid Dabashi observes in *Masters & Masterpieces of Iranian Cinema* (2007) that, what emerges from these three stories is the ‘systematic, unjust, and endemic repression of women written and carved into the fabric of a culture. But the fate of Iranian women is still very much found on the borderline where their own creative imagination and their material conditions collide and implode’.[[357]](#footnote-357) Meshkini, just like many other women filmmakers, exposes the socio-cultural maladies that engulf women’s lives in a patriarchal society, and also gives voice and testifies to the silenced narratives of female identity. Rakhshan Bani-Etemad is another filmmaker who has challenged historical beliefs about women and motherhood in her films. Her *The May Lady* (1998) portrays the tribulations a divorced woman faces in her attempts to balance her life as a working mother and a woman. The motif of re-writing appears in different narratives studied in this thesis as women writers attempt to challenge, revise, and re-mythologize patriarchal narrations into empowering narratives for women. Similarly, filmmakers like Meshkini and Bani-Etemad deconstruct and revise the patriarchal depictions of the maternal in Iran and offer an honest portrayal of contemporary Iranian women’s lives and their relationships as daughters, mothers, and wives.

Through expansion of the scope of mothering studies and by including analyses of non-heteronormative and non-European narratives we can explore the forms of creativity and resistance through which women have achieved change and transformation of power relationships and have established maternal agency.[[358]](#footnote-358) My analysis of the representations of adoption as an alternative mode of mothering in chapter four reflected various socio-cultural issues such as illegitimacy, class and racial positions, and extended families that are intertwined with the life of the adopted. These narratives contributed to the growing number of literary and scholarly works that explore this multifaceted experience and challenge the stereotypical notions of adoption and introduce widely different outlooks on the questions and issues involved. Nonetheless, most of the writings on adoption are from adopted children’s point of view, and although some writers, such as Kay, have tried to incorporate adoptive/birth mothers’ voices in their works, their narratives are mainly focused on daughters. In her introduction to *Mother/Daughter Plot: Narrative, Psychoanalysis, Feminism* (1989), Marianne Hirsch examines Sophocles’ *Oedipus Rex* and asks why the voice of Oedipus’ mother, Jocasta, is missing in ‘men’s plot’ as well as in ‘the plots of sons and daughter’:

Jocasta is represented by silence, negation, damnation, suicide. The story of her desire, the account of her guilt, the rationale for her complicity with a brutal husband, the materiality of the body which gave birth to a child she could not keep and which then conceived with that child other children – *this* story cannot be filled in because we have no framework within which to do it *from her perspective*. She remains, in Oedipus’s words, ‘That wife, no wife of mine – that soil/where I was sown and where I reap my harvest.[[359]](#footnote-359)

Hirsch argues that in order to get to know Jocasta’s maternal story, ‘we would have to *begin* with the mother’.[[360]](#footnote-360) Narratives of adoption and scholarly examinations of these works are mainly daughter-centric and birth/adoptive mothers are yet to make a prominent appearance in mothering studies. Adoption in this thesis also happens figuratively as daughters develop and adopt empowering maternal figures with which they can identify in their journey of self-actualization (e.g. Maxine’s depiction of Fa Mu Lan in chapter five). Through these narratives, daughters adopt the act of writing in order to create their narratives of mother-daughter relationships and challenge and deconstruct the limited, prescribed definitions of the maternal.

Science and technology have hugely contributed to rethinking the boundaries of contemporary maternal experiences, decentralizing hegemonic and totalitarian socio-cultural theories of mothering. The definition of family has expanded beyond the ‘conventional’ nuclear form to include divorced parents, gay and lesbian couples and their children, and parenthood through surrogacy. The number of single-parent and three-parent families is dramatically growing due to modern reproductive technologies and they are gradually becoming a notable feature of modern family life. Jackie Kay is one of the writers whose writings reflect the evolving concept of family. Her poem ‘Mummy and Donor and Deirdre’ narrates the account of a boy who discovers and announces to his classmates that he was conceived by artificial insemination to his lesbian mothers: ‘Tunde said Do you know who your daddy is? / I said yes he’s a friend of a friend of mummy’s’ (*AP* 54-55). As methods of conception evolve, the term ‘mother’ can be perceived differently, hence it is essential to explore the representations of these alternative modes of parenting in mothering studies and analyse the ways in which such narratives challenge narrow definitions of the maternal. As Donna Haraway argues, the new technologies ‘affect the social relations of both sexuality and of reproduction’.[[361]](#footnote-361) Her notion of ‘cyborg’ as ‘a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction’[[362]](#footnote-362) draws on the theory that through exploring the ways in which science and humans change and affect each other, dichotomous and patriarchal patterns that privilege one side and marginalize the other such as ‘male/female’ and ‘right/wrong’ can be overcome. Hence, due to the hybrid nature of the cyborg, racist, sexist, or classist traditions can be transformed and decentralized as the boundaries are blurred. The theory of the cyborg contributes to feminist discussions of identity as it belongs to a world where there is no gender and in which patriarchal narrations of sexuality has no bearing. Technologies have already affected the modes of mothering and the ways in which mothers bridge the gap between home and work. In her article ‘Cyborg Mothering’, Shelley Park introduces the concept of cyber mothering as an ‘evolution of non-normative motherhood’ and explores ‘the importance of technologies of co-presence as extensions and modifications of maternal bodies in families that diverge from the heteronormative paradigm of the nuclear family’. [[363]](#footnote-363) Narratives like ‘Cyborg Manifesto’ and ‘Cyborg Mothering’ transgress boundaries and create the space to explore the implications of modern techniques on social patterns and cultural values such as family and mothering.

This thesis started as a dialogue – between texts, between authors, between cultures – aiming to challenge the borders that have confined narrations of mothering and the mother-daughter relationship. It investigated the ways in which women writers’ deconstruction of patriarchal definitions of mothering creates new representational spaces through which alternative narratives and productive patterns of gendered identities and relations can emerge. The future of mothering studies lies in providing updated representations of the maternal through exploring narratives that represent the modern world’s models of mothering and the ‘cyborgs’ and include all that have been sidestepped before in the name of hegemonic traditions or religions.

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66. Rachel and Leah were the two sisters who married Jacob (Genesis 30:1-3). [↑](#footnote-ref-66)
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