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## The Past and Its Impact on The Present: The Development of Gender and Ethnic Identity in Kingston's "Woman Warrior", Mukherjee's "Jasmine" and Kincaid's "Lucy"

Rachel M. Puckett  
*University of Texas-Pan American*

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THE PAST AND ITS IMPACT ON THE PRESENT: THE DEVELOPMENT OF  
GENDER AND ETHNIC IDENTITY IN KINGSTON'S *WOMAN WARRIOR*,  
MUKHERJEE'S *JASMINE* AND KINCAID'S *LUCY*

A Thesis  
by  
RACHEL M. PUCKETT

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COMMITTEE MEMBERS

Dr. Caroline Miles  
Chair of Committee

Dr. Marci McMahon  
Committee member

Dr. Rebecca Mitchell  
Committee member

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## ABSTRACT

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This thesis analyzes three immigrant narratives and exemplifies the impact that the past has on the main character's cultural and gender development. During the course of each narrative reflections of the past intrude on the present immigrant experience and remind the characters of who they are and where they came from. Kingston's *Woman Warrior* revolves around her cultural past and the psychological impression that her mother's immigrant experience has left on her. In *Jasmine* Mukherjee's main character embarks on a self-reflecting journey that highlights the past that influences her ever changing identity. Finally, in *Lucy* a young woman is determined to flee a country and family that have an almost unbreakable hold on who she is and what she will become. In all of three narratives a similar thread reappears in the form of the past and its influence on the progression of their gender and ethnic identities.





## DEDICATION

The completion of my master's thesis would not have been possible without the love and support from my family. My wonderful husband, Lee Puckett, my amazing children, William, Jake, Jenna, and Jason all helped me focus on the goal and reminded me that I could do it. My father, Reymundo Marroquin Jr. taught me that all things are possible with hard work and dedication. He was an amazing man and a wonderful father. My mother, Dora Marroquin is a constant source of inspiration and love. Both of my parents taught me that all things were possible with an education. Thank you for your love and support.



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## CHAPTER I

### THE PAST AND ITS IMPACT ON THE PRESENT IMMIGRANT EXPERIENCE

As a child of a second generation immigrant, I have always been fascinated by the narratives of those who have left their home in search of a new beginning. The journey to find a place in an environment where one may or may not share a nation's language, religion, or cultural beliefs affects identity and survival in a new place. When one leaves the people and places that define who they are in terms of shared histories and beliefs they experience feelings of nostalgia and melancholy: this process can also be liberating. US immigrant narratives attempt to capture this journey of self-development and all the conflicting moments that comprise an individual's experiences in their search for a new home. Part of this pursuit involves the important role of the past and its direct influence on the present immigrant experience. Many immigrants in the United States experience trauma when they recall former events, places, or people that remind them of their home of origin. Nostalgia is the act of remembering. I use the term nostalgia in the way that Svetlana Boym does in her scholarly book *The Future of Nostalgia*. She states, "Nostalgia (from nostos—return home, and aglia—longing) is a longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed. Nostalgia is a sentiment of loss and displacement" (xiii). There are moments in Jamaica Kincaid's *Lucy* where Lucy embraces the strength that she gains from nostalgia and yet at the same time she refuses to submit to the idea that the past is better than her future. The immigrant narratives that I have chosen deal with



similar conflicts that revolve around the past. In this thesis, I will closely read Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts* (1975), Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine* (1989), and Jamaica Kincaid's *Lucy* (1990); three immigrant narratives that illustrate the impact that the past has on their immigrant experience, particularly the experiences of gender and ethnic identity in the United States. Each of these narratives tells a different story of survival and resilience in a society that is foreign. Conflicts arise and the main characters experience personal traumas that involve the development of their gender and ethnic identities. Each novel contains a female protagonist from different ethnicities who experiences the pull that their cultural past has on their present immigrant encounters, and each character's story highlights the development of gender identity against a patriarchal ethnic culture.

I decided on these three immigrant narratives because they all seemed to focus on the role that both immigration and ethnicity play in the development of a woman's identity. Each of these narratives portray characters that face the harsh realities of leaving the known for the unknown and attempting to survive in a new cultural environment. For the purpose of this thesis immigrants are those that have migrated from one region, country, or place of abode into another. It is normally a permanent move that involves a separation from their homeland. An important aspect to this move to America involves the immigrant's ethnic identity. An ethnic identity, according to psychologist Jean Phinney "is a dynamic, multidimensional construct that refers to one's identity, or sense of self as a member of an ethnic group." She continues, "Ethnic identity is not a fixed categorization, but rather is a fluid and dynamic understanding of self and ethnic background. Ethnic identity is constructed and modified as individuals become aware of their ethnicity, within the large (sociocultural) setting" (qtd. in Trimble 1). An immigrant's journey becomes an independent and collective process. As immigrants encounter

the various elements of the new culture, they experience conflicts between their former values, attitudes and goals and the practices that characterize the organizations or groups surrounding them. The impact that ethnicity has on a person's immigrant experience is illustrated in Kingston's *Woman Warrior* as her ancestors and the cultural beliefs that they symbolize follow her every move and surround her during her upbringing. Her mother's journey to America also becomes her immigrant experience as she suffers the trauma of living with her mother's internal battle as a Chinese woman in America. Mukerjee's *Jasmine* examines the impact of ethnicity on immigrants by demonstrating how difficult it is to assimilate to a different cultural surrounding while maintaining a stable identity. Thus, according to Kay Deaux author of *To Be An Immigrant*, "embedded within the concept of ethnic identity are critical psychological processes by which people—immigrants in particular—define and situate cultural, and historical contexts" (88). Due to these various processes immigrants that come to the United States attempt to hold on to their cultural ties. They attempt to find or build a community that fosters the same beliefs.

Another element of ethnicity that establishes a pattern in these narratives involves self-categorization. This understanding of how individuals place themselves into categories and the importance they place on these categories is an aspect of their identity. The way they see themselves and the way others see them is tied into the "the importance that they attach to that membership...from being central to their sense of self to being an incidental fact of ancestry....The term *importance* denotes the extent to which an identity is significant for the self-concept; other terms in the literature that carry similar meaning include centrality, prominence, and strength"(103). This identification with ethnic identity is prominent in first generation immigrants, but tends to be more difficult for the children of immigrants. Kingston's narrative explores this aspect of ethnic identity development when she struggles with defining

herself as Chinese-American. For many immigrants, self-categorization is something that is tied to a process of evaluation, “the valence” that an individual places on their ethnicity. This evaluation determines the importance that they place on their ethnicity and the importance that others place on their ethnicity (105). Mukherjee’s *Jasmine* illustrates this aspect of ethnicity with the Ripplemeyer’s almost obsessive reference to Jasmine’s culture. Oftentimes the receiving culture tends to lump immigrants into broad categories like ‘Asians’ and ‘Hispanics’; they crave a society that allows their individuality to flourish. In *Immigrant America, A Portrait*, Alejandro Portes and Ruben Rumbaut claim “that ethnicity has always been a socially constructed product, forged in interaction between individual traits and surrounding context” (158). At the same time there are immigrants that face traumatic events in their new home, and they reach a border that halts their temporal progression and reminds them of what they or their family left behind. This process is sometimes linked to the concept of nostalgia.

Nostalgia is a key concept for understanding time and the impact it has on an individual’s perspective on the present and the future. In *the Future of Nostalgia* Svetlana Boym argues, “Nostalgia is not always about the past; it can be retrospective but also prospective. Fantasies of the past determined by needs of the present have a direct impact on realities of the future” (xvi). For some immigrants, dwelling on the past becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy for their future in their new homeland. Kingston’s narrative pulls directly from stories of the past and they influence the way she views her present and future. Jasmine remembers India, not as a fantasy, but as a stark reality that is juxtaposed against her life in America. Lucy tries to forget her past in order to make a place for herself in the United States. In each of these narratives nostalgia plays a part in their immigrant experience. At times nostalgia seems to act as a catalyst for the development of a break in the narrative structure. It highlights the moment that the linear

progression of the narrative is disrupted and the characters emotional development becomes marked by the past and disrupts the present experience. In the historical past, nostalgia was considered a medical illness that consumed an individual's mind with longings for home and then it developed into what Boym describes as "a mourning for the impossibility of mythical return, for the loss of an enchanted world with clear borders and values; it could be a secular expression of a spiritual longing, a nostalgia for an absolute, a home that is both physical and spiritual, the edenic unity of time and space before entry into history" (8). Many immigrants who arrive in a new home attempt to find a physical and spiritual replacement for their lost home. Sometimes these immigrants experience a restorative nostalgia that takes the past and creates an ideal memory of their home and their nation. Others experience a nostalgia that is reflective of the personal lives they left behind. It is important to note that in all three of the narratives I am analyzing the main character has no desire to return to their homeland. Each woman is searching for a "new home" and a sense of belonging to replace the loss of all that was left behind. For Kingston the search for home is an indirect feeling of nostalgia that is present in the loss of home that is illustrated in her mother's stories and her mother's desire to return to China. In *Jasmine*, the main character is individually searching for herself in the United States and only sees her past as a part of her former identity. The role that nostalgia plays in each of these immigrant narratives becomes an active and a passive endeavor to define home and self.

The formation of gender identity takes on a significant role in all three immigrant narratives. In *Gender Trouble* by Judith Butler, she explains that, "When the relevant "culture" that "constructs" gender is understood in terms of such a law or set of laws, then it seems that gender is a determined and fixed as it was under the biology-is-destiny formulation. In such a case, not biology, but culture, becomes destiny" (12). In other words, women assume gender

roles based on the traditional characteristics that their culture assigns to men and women. All three narratives discuss the experience of immigration and the impact it had on their gender identity. Each narrative is the story of a woman from a different country of origin, different age, and different life experience, yet they all share a connection- a connection that weaves together their struggle with accepting who they are in their new home. In Chandra Mohanty's *Feminism without Borders, Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity* she claims that women are united by "their shared perspectives, shared goals, and shared experiences of oppression"(97). Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*, Bharatie Mukjerjee's *Jasmine*, and Jamaica Kincaid's *Lucy* exemplify the various aspects of the female immigrant experience in the United States; many which they share and many that differ based on the intersecting between gender and ethnicity. Kingston's autobiography takes the reader through a journey that involves a past that is fraught with conflicting images that complicate her development as a woman, as a writer, and as a Chinese-American. For instance, when Kingston's mother uses the concept of "talk story" she draws on a Chinese myth that influences Kingston's dreams and distorts what she sees as reality. In *Woman Warrior* the legends and "talk stories" that form the basis of her cultural foundation reiterate the inferior position that women held in Chinese society and reinforce her mother's traditional perceptions on gender roles. In Mukjerjee's *Jasmine* the protagonist reflects on her life from her childhood in India to her adulthood in America. Her experiences in the United States are broken into fragments that shape her concept of culture and her gender identity. These disjointed moments of joy or trauma force her character to face a past that separates her from her present immigrant experiences. In Jamaica Kincaid's *Lucy* the main character almost instantly defines the influence of the past. From the first day that she arrives in America she becomes cognizant of the break between what she knows and what she lives, "like a flow of water

dividing formerly dry and solid ground, creating two banks, one of which was my past-so familiar and predictable...the other my future” (Kincaid 5). Here the impact that the past has on the present is illustrated by a division between what she knows from her homeland and the unknown that surrounds her in the United States.

The development of gender identity is According to Salman Akhtar in *Immigration and Identity: Turmoil, Treatment, and Transformation* gender identity, “consists of three aspects that are essential for an integrated self-identity. These are (1) core gender identity, or the awareness and acceptance of having one or the other type of genitals and therefore being male or female; (2) gender role, or one’s overt behavior in relationship to other people with respect to one’s gender, and (3) sexual partner orientation, or one’s preferred sex of the love object”(66). In this paper the focus will remain on gender identity development as it relates to gender roles that are influenced by an immigrant’s ethnicity and their acceptance of their own femininity. For all three women gender development becomes a repression of the first connection of gender identification that they have with their mother and the cultural connections they make to gender roles that surround them.

Both Bharati Mukherjee’s *Jasmine* and Jamaica Kincaid’s *Lucy* emphasize the pull of the past and how it reflects a post-colonial influence. The main characters face the difficult challenge of dealing with the memories of their post-colonial home that block the development of their immigrant experience. According to Homi Bhabha in *The Location of Culture* the post-colonial perspective “emerges from the colonial testimony of Third World countries and the discourses of ‘minorities’ within the geopolitical divisions of East and West, North and South...that attempt to give a hegemonic ‘normality’ to the uneven development and the differential, often disadvantaged, histories of nations, races, communities, peoples (245). For Mukherjee it is a

religiously divided India and for Kincaid it is a personally divided West Indies. Each of their stories discloses the challenges that immigrant women face when they leave their colonized home and try to survive in a new country. As Edyta Oczkowicz claims in “Jamaica Kincaid’s *Lucy*: Cultural “Translation” As a Case of Creative Exploration of the Past”, all of Kincaid’s works “represent an attempt to define the most vital aspects of post-colonial experiences psychological, cultural, and social marginality; political exclusion; racial and sexual discrimination; and the domination by the white man and his culture (143). *Lucy*’s post-colonial trauma is so acute that just the mention of daffodils leads her to stammer and bite her tongue. For *Jasmine* it is a reminder that comes with every glass of water she drinks and prompts her to recall what she refuses to become: a reflection of the women from her village. In both narratives the main characters are retracing their post-colonial past during the exploration of their new home, and the past effects the development of their gender and ethnic identities. Yet, as hard as they try to reinvent themselves, their memories intrude and remind them of their cultural history. Oczkowicz goes on to discuss how the first two chapters of *Lucy*, (“Poor Visitor” and “Mariah”) illustrate *Lucy*’s abrogation of her past, and they re-establish the tension inherent in the colonial dichotomy of colonizer-colonized. These two worlds are still functioning for *Lucy* in America”(145). The reader is made aware of how changing locations does not change the feelings of post-colonial discomfort. When *Mariah*, *Lucy*’s employer, shares her love for daffodils with *Lucy* she is so distraught at the image of the daffodils that she immediately wants to “kill them”. In *Jasmine*, the main character leaves India as a widow embarking on a journey to America to end her life; instead, she finds herself caught up in the cultural ‘beyond’. As Homi Bhabha states the ‘beyond theory’ is itself a liminal form of signification that creates a space for the contingent, indeterminate articulation of social ‘experience’ that is particularly important for

envisaging emergent cultural identities (256). Jasmine's journey to find a place for herself in the United States involves a complex series of cultural identities that she attempts to embrace during her immigrant experience. Mukherjee illustrates multiple shifts in ethnic identity as Jasmine moves from Joyti to Jasmine, Jase to Jane, and finally Jane to Jase. Bhabha's claims that "Culture becomes as much an uncomfortable, disturbing practice of survival and supplementarity—between art and politics, past and present, the public and the private—as its resplendent being is a moment of pleasure, enlightenment or liberation" (251). All three female characters are attempting to survive in their new cultural surroundings and my thesis will highlight the moments in Kincaid's and Mukherjee's narratives that illustrate how their post-colonial experience hinders the balance between the past and the present.



## CHAPTER II

### A MYTHICAL JOURNEY TO FIND A BALANCE BETWEEN TIME AND CULTURES IN KINGSTON'S *WOMAN WARRIOR*

The intent of this chapter is to analyze Kingston's narrative and explore the moments when the past is an integral part of the structure of her autobiography. The question is not whether the past disrupts her narrative, but for what purpose and how do these incidents define her as a Chinese-American women. By examining how Kingston incorporates the use of legends and fantasies, this chapter illustrates how the text represents the impact that the past has on Kingston's present immigrant development. Kingston breaks up her narrative into sections that chronicle her development and the impact that time and place have on her concept of home and gender. How women and society define gender is something that is passed from generation to generation. The past is an integral part of how an individual learns who they are and their place in the world. For Maxine Hong Kingston the definition of being a Chinese-American woman is a complex and evolving sense of awareness for who she is and where she came from. According to Leslie W. Rabine in "No Lost Paradise: Social Gender and Symbolic Gender in the Writings of Maxine Hong Kingston", feminist writers like Helene Cixous believed that the concept of gender differences develops "as the paradigm by which we conceive the particular patterns of differences that shapes our symbolic order. This pattern is based not on true differences but on hierarchical oppositions. One term, the masculine, posits itself as the primary term and represses the other (feminine) term, replacing it with its mirror opposite, a secondary term, derived from

process or “symbolic law” that constantly reminds us that men and women are opposites functions at all levels. This hierarchical opposition is present in Kingston’s family, her history, and her discourse. Kingston even blends the masculine and the feminine in her retelling of legends in order to find her place in her cultural history. Her mother’s teachings and her Chinese culture tell her that being a “girl” is a curse and not a blessing, but the legend of Fa Mu Lan incorporates a mixing of the masculine and the feminine. She takes this story and retells it with the past, in the form of an old man and an old woman. The old couple represents a blending of genders that creates a balance that is necessary to train the “girl” to be a warrior. In “Filiality and Woman’s Autobiographical Storytelling” Sidonie Smith focuses on the struggle that Kingston has with constructing “her own subjectivity, to emerge from a *past* dominated by stories told to her, ones that inscribe the fictional possibilities of female selfhood, into a *present* articulated by her own storytelling” (59). Each section of Kingston’s autobiography becomes a representation of this struggle between the past and the “constricting patriarchal circle” that continues to surround her narrative. This chapter will highlight the past and how it is represented in the cultural legends, family history, and female role models that mark a disruption in Kingston’s cultural and gender development.

In *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts*, Kingston brings to light the conflicts that haunt her development as a Chinese-American woman. Her narrative relates the trauma that occurs when an individual is raised in America and trapped between two cultures. Kingston is at once drawn to and disturbed by the role that women play in the traditional Chinese culture that her mother recounts. As a little girl Kingston was taught that a woman’s place was as a “wife or a slave.” Yet, the stories she was told and those she dreamt about showed her the strength and courage that created heroines and female warriors. Her mother, the foundation of

her understanding of culture, gender and sexuality, told her the stories that would later guide her development as a woman and a writer. Kingston's awareness of her gender is based on the ideals of a culture whose signifiers focus on a female in need of subordination by a male figure. The women may start off as strong and independent, but they ultimately must tie themselves to a man for cultural acceptance. In Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* gender construction is a complex blending that includes, "the problematic nature/culture distinction" that often times reiterates an "instance in which reason and mind are associated with masculinity and agency, while the body and nature are considered to be the mute facticity of the feminine, awaiting signification from an opposing masculine subject"(48). The cultures that surround Kingston remind her that gender identity is dependent on the hierarchy that exists between male and female. She attempts to create a balance between her Chinese heritage and the American culture that surrounds her.

In Kingston's novel *The Woman Warrior* she breaks up her story into sections that emphasize the importance of the past, in the form of her family history, and its impact on her cultural and gender development. In her initial story "No Name Woman" Kingston introduces the ancestral ghost that haunts her with a "hunger" for atonement. Smith emphasizes, "the mother's cautionary tale at once affirms and seeks to cut off the daughter's kinship with a transgressive female relative and her unrepressed sexuality" (60). Kingston's "aunt" is a symbol of disobedience and death. Her story is told as a warning to Kingston that her gender and sexuality can destroy her family and herself. Her mother ties in her "aunt's" experience as if the "villagers" are watching Kingston in the United States waiting for her to "humiliate" their ancestral name (12). Kingston realizes that even a forgotten part of her past can directly influence her life. She looks for a cultural connection to this woman who has no name and no family, as if her aunt is a catalyst for her desire to connect with her ancestral heritage. The core

to Kingston's heritage revolves around the "ghosts" that haunt her. Her aunt's story draws her in because, "after fifty years of neglect, I alone devote pages of paper to her, though not origami-ed into houses and clothes" (16). Her attempt to honor her aunt is a testament to cultural displacement. She acknowledges the "old" ways, but uses the more modern American form of writing to recognize her aunt's place in her genealogy. A place that recognized that, "a child with no descent line would not soften her life but only trail after her, ghost-like begging her to give it purpose" (15). Her culture extracts its foundation from those that have come before and her aunt illustrates the intentional erasure of that person from the family's history. "No Name Woman" becomes a shadow that follows the family but is completely ignored. Until, Kingston makes her an icon that represents a significant part of her past, and that past illustrates the conflict that exists between the development of female sexuality and a patriarchal society. The past she recreates in her Aunt's story seems to reflect the conundrum of her own existence, the balance that she cannot seem to find in her own time. Kingston notes that, "the village structure, spirits shimmering among the live creatures, balanced and held in equilibrium by time and land" is a part of the past she wants to claim (12). A past she wants to define in order to find a land she can call "home", and a home she hopes to reclaim by conquering the boundaries that are dividing her cultural identity; time and space.

In the section titled "White Tigers" Kingston moves her narrative into the realm of ancestral spirituality as a reconstruction of her desire to become a "woman warrior" and find her place as a Chinese-American woman. Her mother's stories draw her into her cultural history and begin to build a barrier between her modern beliefs and tradition. The "talk story" that invades her dreams centers on the legend of China's great female warrior, Fa Mu Lan. She begins this section of her narrative with a detailed account of Fa Mu Lan's separation from her

family. An old man and an old woman come into Fa Mu Lan's life and begin her physical and spiritual training. This reflection of the "old ways" versus the "new ways" becomes a prevalent theme in Kingston's narrative; the past competing with the present. Fa Mu Lan's mentors separate her from her family and guide her into becoming a warrior. During her fourteenth year they force her to live bare-handed in the tiger place. As the days pass she remembers the words that the old people told her about fire and water and she depends on their wisdom for her survival (24). It is at this point that the legend itself acknowledges the importance of time. She sees the golden dancers and suddenly she is "watching the centuries pass in moments" and suddenly she understands time (27). The warrior realizes that although time is fixed it also blends and becomes a continuum of all the different eras: past, present and future. It is important to note for the sake of my argument that Kingston is aware that in order for Fa Mu Lan to become a "woman warrior" she was taken from her social surroundings and trained in isolation. This separation from the Chinese cultural norms allowed Fa Mu Lan to develop into a woman warrior. Fa Mu Lan moves on to the Dragon lessons that demand the patience and understanding that only time can create and the old couple mastered. The entire legend focuses on the theme of time as it highlights the period that she trains, and the fragment of time that is consumed with battle. Kingston elaborates the various conquests that Fa Mu Lan accumulates as an avenging soldier and highlights her ability to accomplish almost anything. Yet, she understands that in order to achieve this goal she must also dismiss her sexuality and "replace her father in battle, eventually freeing her community from the exploitation and terrorization of the barons" (Smith 65). In the end, she returns as a conquering warrior that must bow down to her in-laws and replace the armor with the apron. Relinquishing her former glory as a warrior and taking her place in the home as a "wife and slave". Kingston is aware that this legend captures the essence of time and

gender, and how both battle against each other in the Chinese culture. It is her ability as a woman warrior to take what she needs from the past and be content and productive in the present that drives Kingston's envy and discontent.

These feelings of inadequacy fuel an abrupt shift in "White Tigers" from the iconic Fa Mu Lan to the muted and disheartened Kingston. She cannot seem to find the balance between her two cultures and she laments that her, "American life has been such a disappointment" (45). In fact, she seems to be completely lost in time and space. Although Fa Mu Lan saved a village, Kingston seems unaware of where her village is and if she even belongs to one. She envisions herself as a mighty swordswoman that juggles a family and career. Inside she is driven by the "swordswoman"; an ancestral connection that is an integral part of what motivates Kingston to reach for cultural stability. Kingston seems to recreate this legend in order to draw on her own personal experience of becoming a woman warrior. She has to decide which lessons from the "old ways" to apply to her modern life. It becomes a matter of "transforming, or imagining aspects of the historical, personal, and cultural past into a contemporary constellation in order to validate, make coherent, and give history and continuity to certain modern and post modern experiences"(Hogue 111). The ancient history of her culture is such a prevalent part of her existence that she must find a way to incorporate it into the modern American world that she lives in. This section of the narrative switches to her life in America and how difficult it is to become her own warrior. The line between past and present continues to blur as Kingston imagines herself as a swordswoman facing down her American enemy. She sees them "in their modern American executive guise, each boss two feet taller than I am and impossible to meet eye to eye" (48). She is aware of the physical and cultural differences that separate her from her modern American counterparts. Although America is her home she harbors feelings of

resentment and discomfort at not being able to fit in completely as a Chinese American. Kingston realizes that she has “grown up in a traditional home and culture, whose values, whose conceptions of time and space, are in total contrast to the values of her integrated, secular American education” (Hogue 113). The ideas she has as a woman and as a writer or based on the blending of these principles. She recognizes that her position in society is colored by her Chinese American values and she attempts to create a bridge that will allow her two cultures to co-exist within herself and her society, a bridge between the past and present which allows her to exist in the modern world as a ‘woman warrior.’

In “Shaman” the focus of Kingston’s narrative shifts to the most influential female warrior in her life: her mother. This section describes in detail her mother’s educational experiences and her professional life in China. The medical school she attended blended the line between the past and the present by beginning her education with “a text as old as the Han Empire, when the prescription for immortality had not yet been lost” (62). The school believed that the “ancient cures” were mastered before modern western practices. Her mother had an experience during medical school that placed her on the bridge between the past and the present. When she fought the “sitting ghost” her soul floated away until it “returned fully to her and nestled happily inside her skin, for this moment not traveling in the past where her children were nor to America to be with my father” (72). In her battle against the ghost she is drawn between time periods. Her friends brought her back to the present by calling her name (Brave Orchid) and she finished school a successful doctor. Brave Orchid returned to her village and the people revered her “like the ancient magicians who come down from the mountains” (76). Finally, her husband sent for her and she left China. When she arrived in America she was instantly surrounded by “ghosts”. These ghosts became an integral part of her existence in the United

States. She shifts the “sitting ghosts” from China to the “Taxi Ghosts, Bus Ghosts, Police Ghosts,” and the “White Ghosts” in the states. This merging of beliefs from the past in China and the present in the United States is Kingston’s attempt to build a cultural identity that unifies the past and the present.

Through her “talk-stories” *Brave Orchid* colors a world for her children that glistens with ancestral spirits and mingles with elaborate ghosts. Kingston was surrounded by images that reminded her of the bridge between the past and present. Her mother intentionally framed her home with, “ancestral spirits, relatives whose images hung upon the walls of the family’s Stockton home, to whom from time to time” she made “strange offerings” ( Stange 21). The stories and pictures often left Kingston with recurring “nightmares” that plagued her days and nights. It was a ritual for her to “turn on the lights before anything untoward” manifested and it was vital for her to “push the deformed” into her dreams (87). Most of these dreams were in Chinese because it is the language that she associates with the “impossible”. Not only does her mother mark her mental history with stories, but she begins to question her reference on time. She goes on to tell her daughter that time was different in China and Kingston responds by emphasizing that “time is the same from place to place” (106). As if convincing herself that blending her concepts of time and space is a necessary element in her cultural development. Kingston depends on this belief in order to create a point of reference for her maturation into a tranquil American life. It becomes the only way of finding a real “home”

“At the Western Palace” focuses on the immigrant experience of Kingston’s aunt Moon Orchid and her inability to handle the move from China to California. In this section of the narrative Kingston illustrates how temporal stagnation can be harmful to mental health. She begins by showing that the two sisters have no concept of the passage of time. Both are shocked



at the others appearance and continually repeat, “you’re so old... how did you get so old?”(119). They each have a distorted understanding of time and cannot comprehend that thirty years will impact their bodies and their personalities. When Moon Orchid arrives in California she is content staying with her sister and folding clothes at the laundry. Yet, Brave Orchid insists that she confront her husband and reclaim her rightful place as first wife. Moon Orchid hesitates, claiming that she is scared and wants to return to Hong Kong (125). This fear becomes an overwhelming factor in Moon Orchids life. It cripples her development as an American and shortens her life. Her husband wants nothing to do with her and her “time” in America is marked with a devastating sense of anxiety. She begins to imagine her nieces and nephews as “rude” and “accusing” because they do not follow the “demure” mannerisms of the Chinese culture. She compares their American upbringing to the “wilderness” and feels that their conversation is “savage” and their movements are “rough” (133). Her aunt’s observations serve as a reflection of the opinions that Kingston recognizes in society. Moon Orchid never really attempts to assimilate into American life. She cannot seem to embrace the different concepts of “time” in America. Her body and her mind are programmed to function at a slower, more antiquated pace. She becomes another immigrant that cannot find a “home” in her new country.

Kingston uses her aunt’s story as a reflection of how own. It is through Moon Orchid that she expresses her fear of “madness”. This section of the narrative serves as a warning of what might happen if you allow your fear to envelope your soul. Brave Orchid realized that “Moon Orchid had misplaced herself, her spirit (her ‘attention,’ Brave Orchid called it) scattered all over the world” (157). After being discarded by her husband she eventually ends up living with her sister. Unfortunately, her mind loses its “variety” and she is placed in an asylum. It is

through this narrative that Kingston conveys a compassion for the immigrant experience. She understands that her aunt could not find a balance between the borders of time or culture.

Finally, “A Song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe” closes off the narrative with a compilation of stories that echo Kingston’s search for a balance between time and culture. A stability that she feels can only be accomplished by finding her voice. In the beginning her voice sounded harsh like “splinters” or “bones” (169). She is unable to tell her own story. Silence becomes a weapon that is used against her. In her observations she realizes that Chinese immigrants are loud and unattractive to American ears. She remembers a young girl who refused to talk in Chinese school. Kingston hated her silence because it appeared to be self-inflicted. She saw a reflection of herself and could not tolerate the reality. It became her personal mission to force this girl to speak. In her attempts at aiding the young girl she resorts to physical and emotional abuse. It is as if she is berating herself for her own cowardice. Her desire to be a “woman warrior” blinds her to her actions and lends an almost desperate quality to them. After leaving the young girl sobbing and traumatized she returns home and spends the next eighteen months recuperating from a mysterious illness; an illness that reflected her guilty conscience. Later she realizes that the young girl’s silence is motivated by the fact that Chinese Americans were raised “among ghosts, were taught by ghosts, and were our-selves ghost-like” (183). These ghosts represent the values of the past and create an opportunity for Kingston to engage in a modern dialogue with the conventions of her ancestral culture that impact her present. She understands that at this time and in this place she needs to define who she is by following in her ancestor’s footsteps.

Part of Kingston’s transformation and temporal understanding occurs when she acknowledges that she is not the “crazy” member of the family. She obsesses over the fact that each section of her narrative contains an individual that is mentally unstable. “No Name

Woman” seemed to lose her mind when she commits suicide. Her mother watches a crazy woman being stoned to death in China. Then, Moon Orchid’s paranoia debilitates her and she dies in an asylum. Whether the woman are related to her, or complete strangers, they become relevant examples of what she fears most; insanity. Her thoughts begin to revolve around the fact that she hears “adventurous people inside” her head that provide her with endless conversations. Yet, her mother’s words provide the comfort and understanding that take her from the shadows of her fear to the illumination of her future. She explains the distinction between a mad person and a sane person. Brave Orchid clarifies that “sane people have variety when they talk-story. Mad people have only one story that they talk over and over” (159). Kingston’s begins to appreciate the gift of her imagination and the numerous stories that she has yet to tell. The last section of her narrative begins with a story that she and her mother both compose. It is a testament to the fusion of time and an understanding of the borders that can be manipulated in order to create a narrative history. She acknowledges that the beginning of the story is her mothers and the ending is hers (206). It is a story that perfectly illustrates Kingston’s power to control the impact that time has on her personal narrative. The story involves a young woman who is taken by “barbarians” and forced to live in a new place. After years of silence she begins to sing a song with her children that carries over to future generations. It is a talk-story that seems to mirror Kingston’s life and shows how she takes the past and illustrates an understanding of the present.

Kingston’s overall quest as a narrative writer is to take traditional Chinese legends, personal events and family stories and manipulate them into representations of her own personal issues. Problems that revolve around her quest for personal truth involve a blending of time and space in her cultural development. She blends myths and legends with historical events that

occurred to her and to her family and creates a memoir that is relevant to her modern existence. Kingston's fixation with the past is an aspect of her identity that builds her historical perspective and allows her to arrive at her own individual truths. Her ability to transform events and memories into coherent narratives gives the reader an insight into her life and validity to her experiences. There truth is not in whether they occurred or nor, but in how Kingston selects and positions them into a narrative that gives them life. Kingston's memoir draws the reader into her story by mapping out the development of her gender and ethnic identity in four parts. The first two parts of her narrative focus on the historical and cultural legends that define her ethnic development and her understanding of what it is to be a Chinese woman. The last two sections stress the present day female role models that define her gender development. Kingston understands that the past is something that can only be remembered or relived through the marks it makes on our narrative present.

### CHAPTER III

#### THE CONFLICT OF TIME AND PLACE AS IT DEFINES CULTURE AND GENDER IN MUKHERJEE'S JASMINE

In *Jasmine* Bharati Mukherjee exhibits an understanding of the postcolonial experience from her own life in India. Her narrative is influenced by having a history that reflects “the background of a particular social formation, the Bengali, English-educated middle class created by British colonization in India during the nineteenth century” (*Transnational America* 40). Being on a border between colonialism and the struggles with decolonization reinforces the impact that the past has on the present. Mukherjee’s novel grapples with illustrating the ‘restaging’ of the past in the present and how this new form of identity formation impacts her immigrant development. Part of the past for Jasmine involves the postcolonial influence and is clearly seen in the exile that she inherits and the migration that she chooses. Mukherjee forces her reader to see that “The postcolonial perspective forces us to rethink the profound limitations of a consensual and collusive ‘liberal’ sense of cultural community. It insists that cultural and political identity are constructed through a process of alterity. Questions of race and cultural difference overlay issues of sexuality and gender and overdetermine the social alliances of class and democratic socialism” (Bhabha 250). The altered identity becomes a motif in *Jasmine*, and can be seen in her continual need to change her gender and ethnic identity in order to survive. The beginning of Mukherjee’s postcolonial statement begins with her title and develops through her strategic narrative structure. In Sandra Ponzanesi’s *Pardoxes of Postcolonial Culture*:

*Contemporary Women Writers of the Indian and Afro-Italian Diaspora* she claims that a discussion of V.S. Naipaul's essay "Jasmine" is necessary in order to understand *Jasmine's* contribution to the postcolonial conversation. Naipaul's essay focuses on the jasmine flower and how it is used "as a leading metaphor for the disconnection between the colonial natural world and the possibility of its representation through the English language imposed by the colonizers" (Ponzanesi 33). The postcolonial experience that Naipaul relates in his essay is very similar to the daffodils illustrated in Kincaid's *Lucy*. Jasmine and Lucy are both taught about flowers in a world that makes no connection to their previous memories and associations and they refuse to accept them as part of their immigrant experience. In *Jasmine* Ponzanesi believes that Mukherjee's model for success in America is based on an "adaptation to American otherness through a concentration of permutations while at the same time keeping Indian diversity and mythological tales for strategic purposes" (Ponzanesi 39). The strategic placement of her postcolonial memories in her present narrative will be examined in this thesis as a means of influencing Jasmine's concept of home and her gender identity. The past is not revived in order to emphasize her quest to return home, but to stress her re-evaluation of self. A re-evaluation that reflects on her personal history and the patriarchal society that attempts to mold her into an acceptable version of herself, therefore, influencing how she perceives herself as a woman during the course of her immigrant experience.

Jasmine's narrative moves from her home of "origin" to the United States and the various homes she stays at on her journey to find herself. I will discuss the idea that Jasmine's image of home will forever be tied to a patriarchal confinement or male bond that creates a false sense of stability. Jasmine's gender and ethnic identity are tied to what Sandra Ponzanesi claims were Mukherjee's "plan to develop a female ethnic identity into an assimilated American at all

costs...Juggling a bit with Hindu mythology, a bit with the American dream, Mukherjee creates the illusion of a continuum between the oppressive Indian female identity and the new invigorating, multiplying American subjecthood” (Ponzanesi 39). By structuring the narrative in this format Mukherjee is attempting to prove that a connection can be made between the two cultures. Unfortunately finding a balance between cultures seems more an illusory dream than a reality. According to Chandra Talpade Mohanty in *Feminism without Borders, Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity*, “being home” refers to the place where one lives within familiar, safe, protected boundaries; “not being home” is a matter of realizing that home was an illusion of coherence and safety based on the exclusion of specific histories of oppression and resistance, the repression of differences even within oneself” (90). For Jasmine her home in India symbolizes “a past that she is still fleeing” one that reminds her of a reality that is too difficult to share. It was too difficult for Jasmine to remain in India without her husband and her encounters with other men continue to draw her into a patriarchal world that forces her to redefine herself. These men alter her immigrant experience and cause her to hover between finding herself and being who they expect her to be.

In *Jasmine* the main character balances between two worlds: her present immigrant experience in America and her past cultural existence in India. In each location she is controlled by a patriarchal society that sees her as a female that inhabits a very specific place in society. As she attempts to find a home a very clear division is created by her experiences as a woman coming to America and her cultural beliefs as an Indian woman. The beliefs and traditions that surround Jasmine as a child are old and timeless. As Jasmine’s narrative develops, she is torn between her desire to be a woman in America and the cultural restrictions that bind her to her past. Mukherjee’s *Jasmine* and Kingston’s *Woman Warrior* both emphasize the impact that the

past has on the present. Jasmine and Kingston face the same shame and dishonor as females in their respective cultures. They both endeavor to rise above the boundaries of time and space that surround their development as women. Jasmine's past stands as a barrier between her traditional beliefs and her current experiences as a female immigrant in America trying to find her place in a new environment. In Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine*, it is important to distinguish between Jasmine's understanding and awareness of her present cultural identity and how it is developed by the past. Jasmine's retrospective narrative opens a window into her personal and cultural development. It is a view that allows the reader to track the progression of her gender identity and her quest for a home.

Jasmine's concept of gender, which she developed at a very early age, is steeped in her cultural past. The line between what she experiences and what she believes is based on the ideas and actions her family and her culture impart on her developing identity. She is aware that although she was born during a prosperous season and this should have been a blessing on the family, her gender renders the fortunate timing a misfortune on the family. She acknowledges that being a daughter is a "curse". According to her cultural history, women who had daughters were being punished for sins committed during another lifetime (Mukherjee 39). Jasmine realizes that girls are not wanted and once they arrive they bring nothing but mental and financial sorrow to the family. Having to provide a dowry to more than one daughter often left the family penniless and resentful. Educating a daughter was considered unnecessary and wasteful. Her mother bluntly reminds her that God's biggest cruelty is "to waste brains on a girl" (Mukherjee 40). Yet, Jasmine was determined to learn English and her attempts to defy the cultural and temporal boundaries that surround her led to three extra years of education. Unfortunately, her father and her culture still considered her ultimate goal was to achieve a "once in a life-time



bride groom". Even when her teacher came home to persuade her family that there were more opportunities for a woman than just marriage and children, her father's response was, "bright ladies are bearing bright sons, that is nature's design"( Mukherjee 51). Even Jasmine's dream of becoming a physician is marked down as madness and her delusions blamed on her mother. All faults and weaknesses fall on the female and this influences Jasmine's developing concept of gender identity. As her mother tolerates the physical and emotional beatings that follow Jasmine's rebellion against the traditions and norms that confine her; she is conscience of the physical and emotional sacrifices her mother makes in order for her to transcend the cultural limitations that define women in India.

As the narrative develops Jasmine's relationship with Prakash reinforces her gender development. In fact, one of Jasmine's acts of defiance against traditions and gender roles involves her marriage to Prakash. Her husband's beliefs were very different from the other men in her village because "he does not see marriage as the cultural sanctioning of patriarchal control and enforced obedience" (Ruppel 184). From the very beginning of their relationship Prakash makes it clear that he wants a wife who is not bound by traditions. By giving Jasmine her new name he attempts to break her away from the feudalism of Hasnapur. Yet at the same time Mukherjee is reminding us that it is a man that is redefining and renaming Jasmine.

Unfortunately, Jasmine's view on marriage is still defined by the past. She believes that her main contribution to the relationship is a child. At this point in the narrative Jasmine's mentality is unable to distinguish the past from the present and it merges into one perimeter that surrounds her. Consequently, Jasmine defines traditional gender roles based on the belief that "to prove her worth and to validate her identity" she must get pregnant (Ruppel 184). Jasmine sees Prakash as a modern man who defines love as "letting go" and that it involved "independence" and "self-

reliance". Her acknowledgement of his progressive ideas leaves her feeling "suspended between worlds" (Mukherjee 76). She is tied down to the ideals of her culture and she realizes that although her husband wants her to be modern and independent, he still guides her changing identity. Prakash wields a "subtle form of patriarchal control, disguised as benevolence" and demands her conformity (Ruppel 184). It is not until the end of their short marriage that a "true" equality emerges in their relationship. Prakash realizes that his wife can work by his side as an equal and he begins to dream of them owning a business. Yet, an act of religious violence ends Jasmine's young dreams and her burgeoning identity as a young, independent woman. Her husband is killed and she faces the variance of time that separate her present independence and her past cultural submission. Jasmine's actions reflect her precarious balance between tradition and change. She decides to travel to the United States in order to commit suttee. This ritual suicide symbolizes an India that is "forever feudal, undeveloped, and barbaric, and, hence, still in need of Western guidance" (Ruppel 185). Her decision to leave India begins her immigrant experience as a female traveling to America.

In the next stage of Jasmine's narrative she begins her pilgrimage to America and encounters a country that stands in stark contrast to India, but has some of the same repressive and violent reactions towards women. Jasmine sees herself and the other immigrants as "outcasts and deportees, strange pilgrims visiting outlandish shrines...asking only one thing: to be allowed to land; to pass through; to continue" (Mukherjee 101). As a female traveling alone she faces the challenge of finding safe passage, and finding guidance in her transition to American culture. Unfortunately, her wellbeing is sabotaged by Half-Face, the captain of the trawler, and she is exposed to a horrific side of America. She realizes that although her husband was killed and died in her arms, her experience with Half-Face shows her "for the first time...what evil was

about. It was about not being human” (Mukherjee 116). After her rape she considers undoing the physical and emotional damage that was done to her by committing suicide. While she contemplates this “balancing” of sins, she realizes that her “mission” in life is unfulfilled. It becomes obvious to the reader that “her brutal rape at the hands of Half-face, a man who represents the worst of America in his racist, and inhuman treatment of the Asian and black refugees aboard his trawler, is a climatic moment in the text which signals the sudden awakening of Jasmine’s “sense of mission”(Leard 117). Jasmine is suffused with a sense of strength that goes beyond the expectations of her gender. The choice she makes to kill her attacker instead of killing herself reaffirms the formation of her survival code. Ironically, she disguises herself as Kali, the goddess of destruction, when she purifies her body and cuts her tongue. By hiding behind the mask of Kali, she is embracing a symbol of female strength in her culture. For India Kali is “the goddess of destruction, but not in a haphazard, random way. She is the destroyer of evil so that the world can be renewed” (Ruppel 186). Jasmine is able to take an aspect of her culture and use it to move forward in her immigrant experience. The symbolic renewal that Jasmine is initiating allows her to release the weight of her husband’s dreams and she leaves the motel to begin her journey in America “traveling light”. Jasmine’s arrival in America initiates her “experiences in an alien society” and “parallel(s) the emergence of a new selfhood despite the vulnerability of her youth and material circumstances” (Leard 117). As she moves forward in her search for a “home” in this new country she attempts to bridge the borders of time and culture that remind her of the past.

As her journey continues she comes across her first positive impression of America in the form of a seventy year old woman. Lillian Gordon is dedicated to helping immigrants adjust to life in America. She helps Jasmine change from a shy mousy young Indian woman, into a

confident and self-assured “Jazzy”. Her mantra is powerful in its simplicity, “let the past make you wary, by all means. But do not let it deform you” (Mukherjee 131). At one point Jasmine is momentarily crippled by her memories of Prakash and his “western shoes”, and Lillian provides the calming influence that helps her “continue” her passage into American society. Jasmine learns to walk like an American and she adjusts not only her physical appearance, but her cultural awareness. She is an active participant in her transformation and she finds strength in her ability to acknowledge the past and the disruption it creates; without letting it control her. Her strength of character rested on her ability to desire a normal life even though she suffered extraordinary experiences. In fact, she sees the irony behind the inevitable destruction of Lillian’s house and how it is replaced with a “mixed-use vacation and residence community”. The house that held stories of immigrant nightmares, now provides a paradise vacation getaway. Jasmine is no longer shocked by the “speed of transformation, the fluidity of American character and the American landscape” because these changes are reflections of her own identity makeover (Mukherjee 138). Jasmine is conscience of the tidal wave of change that is consuming her, but she is powerless and unwilling to stop it.

When the time comes for Jasmine to leave Lillian she arrives at Professorji’s house in New York and feels suffocated by his Indian family. She cannot fathom staying more than five months in this displaced Indian household. The gender stereotypes are more defined in Professorji’s house and they remind Jasmine of her past and the traditions that enclose a young Indian widow. Professorji’s wife is only brought into the family once the husband has saved enough money to have children. Reaffirming the belief that marriage was only to procreate and that a woman’s role was to bare children. Nirmala, his wife, dealt with the daily life of an American immigrant by working during the day at a sari store and escaping into Hindi movies at

night (Mukherjee 144). By reinventing her culture in America, Nirmala does not have to reinvent her identity. She lives in a social bubble that is familiar and comforting. None of them socialize outside their cultural circle and they force Jasmine to participate in their reinvented “India”. Jasmine is told to discard her American outfits for the much older and respectable sari. The traditional code of conduct that was moved from India to New York becomes a reflection of the past that builds a wall around the family and keeps them from accepting and participating in American culture. Jasmine views her confinement as oppressive and she begins to resent the “artificially maintained Indianness” and she tries to “distance” herself from everything that reminds her of India (Mukherjee 145). Living with the Professorji was supposed to be another step in her acclimation to American society and instead it was regressive. Jasmine becomes cognizant of time as a frame that surrounds her when she is alone “sobbing from unnamed, unfulfilled wants...An imaginary brick wall topped with barbed wire cut me off from the past and kept me from breaking into the future” (Mukherjee 148). Jasmine coveted her liberation from the Professorji and his wife because they began to symbolize a life in America that was too similar to the one she escaped from in India. She became fixated with the idea that freedom was attainable only through the acquisition of a green card, and her liberation was necessary to avoid the cultural binds that were tying her to Professorji’s family. She realized that her perspective would remain traditional if she continued to be exposed to the “ancient prescription of marital accord: silence, order, authority” versus “submission, beauty, innocence” (Mukherjee 151). Jasmine craves a balance between tradition and innovation. She wants to experience life in America not as a “ghost, hanging on” but as an immigrant facing the promise of tomorrow.

Jasmine’s next step in attaining her cultural identity involves the creation of her first American family. She meets Taylor and Wylie Hayes and immediately embraces their child as

her own and they become her family. Taylor presents an anomaly that intrigues Jasmine and she immediately falls in love with what he represents. He is a “professor who served biscuits to a servant, smiled at her and admitted her to the broad democracy of his joking, even when she didn’t understand it” (Mukherjee 167). Instead of being shocked by Taylor’s casual attitude, she is drawn in by his unique personality. Jasmine is enthralled by his humor and his “goofiness”. She does not mind when Taylor begins to manipulate her identity by changing her name. In fact she embraces “Jase” as “a woman who bought herself spangled heels and silk chartreuse pants” (Mukherjee 176). She has become a woman that blends in with American society. Jasmine acknowledges that the dependable servant is the exterior that everyone sees, but inside she is an explorer waiting for the next adventure. She realizes that the Hayes’ perceive her as “humorous, intelligent, refined, affectionate. Not illegal, not murderer, not widowed, raped, destitute, fearful.” (Mukherjee 171). Her American family empowers her with a new sense of self-worth and control. By earning money in the domestic sphere and at the University she is crossing gender boundaries and cultural borders that were impossible to bridge in her past. She is an active participant in the quest for her gender identity and her cultural understanding.

Unfortunately, Jasmine’s feelings of security and self-worth are short lived. One of the hardest lessons for her to learn involved the concept of “temporary fulfillment”. As an immigrant she realizes that everyone who arrives in America is “so eager to learn, to adjust, to participate, only to find the monuments are plastic, agreements are annulled. Nothing is forever, nothing is so terrible, or so wonderful, that it won’t disintegrate” (Mukherjee 181). Her American family begins to transform into the stereotypical “broken home”. When Wylie leaves Taylor, Jasmine begins to question the concept of happiness (Mukherjee 182). The moments in time that define her cultural understanding begin to blur, reminding her that America is not easily understood.

Jasmine questions Wylie's discontent and tries to absorb the implications of this new and unexpected twist in her journey. As her "American family" changes, "Jasmine must seek to negotiate and resituate, continually, the horizon of her fears and desires" (Ruppel 187). After her initial shock passes, Jasmine begins to enjoy life with Taylor and Duff and for a brief period of time she basks in the idea that they might be a family. Taylor is the only man in her life that sees her as a woman. He does not distinguish between class and race; gender seems to be the only boundary that exists in their relationship. Although he seems to embrace her "foreignness" he instigates her transformation to Jase. Jasmine allows Taylor to guide the development of her gender identity and regresses into the submissive feminine role that stems from her cultural past. The back and forth development of her role as a woman is provoked by her immigrant experiences that clash with traditional Indian beliefs and new America ideals. As the intimacy between Taylor and Jasmine strengthens, so do her protective instincts. When she finds out that her American family is in danger she abandons all her hopes and dreams in order to guarantee their safety. Jasmine's time with Taylor and Duff ends because her past comes back to haunt her and it induces her to continue her journey in America.

Jasmine leaves New York for Iowa and over time she acknowledges the cultural similarities between Baden and Hasnapur. In Baden Jasmine becomes Jane and "the point to note here is that she is actively changing her name, rather than passively accepting a name" (Ruppel 187). Jasmine leaves Jase behind and becomes a simplified version of her former self. The longer that Jasmine stays in Iowa the more she sees the cultural connections between Iowa and India. Although they appear different, the concepts of culture and time that guide Jasmine's experiences expose their subtle similarities. The people in Baden begin to represent the farmers that Jasmine remembers from India. Both groups are "modest people; never boastful, tactful and

courtly in their way”( Mukherjee 11). Even the tragic shooting of Bud by the desperate farmer parallels the death of Jasmine’s husband. Bud himself is a reflection of Jasmine’s father and the Professorji in his desire “to preserve a vision of the past as a pure, uncontested and originary terrain” (Ruppel 188). His nostalgia prevents him from approving any loans that would instigate change. Bud’s only move towards something different and progressive involves his relationship with Jasmine. Again, Jasmine’s cultural past plays a key role in Bud’s decision to court her. She realizes that he is drawn to her because she represents, “darkness, mystery, inscrutability. The East plugs me into instant vitality and wisdom. I rejuvenate him simply by being who I am” (Mukherjee 200). Bud’s feelings for Jasmine reflect an emotional obsession that borders on complete dependence. He depends on her for his physical and emotional needs, but he still remains the dominant figure in the household. Jasmine’s relationship with Bud reduces her to the role of the traditional submissive and obedient wife. She realizes that every role she has played in America has been a necessary transformation in her cultural survival. Yet, she avoids marrying Bud in order to retain “control of her body and destiny” (Ruppel 187). Bud has always avoided any reference to the cultural and temporal conflicts that surround Jane. He feels that any mention of India is a disloyalty to his traditions and their relationship. Jasmine views the boundaries that merge her past and her present as part of her development as a woman in America. She decides to abandon the “dutiful” role of caregiver and embrace the “promise of America.”

Jasmine’s journey to America is marked by her gender and her ethnicity. Jasmine shifts from one gender role to another and in the process struggles with her ethnic identity. She shifts from cynicism to optimism and realizes that “For every gesture of loyalty there doesn’t have to be betrayal... pain and hope, hope and pain (Mukherjee 225). Jasmine accepts the past as it



intrudes on her present and reminds her of the submissive and ignorant role she was expected to play and she welcomes the opportunity to change. As she stumbles to find her place in each social setting, the shadow of India hovers over her. Old memories follow Jasmine as she journeys through America and cultural traditions impact her decisions. For Jasmine, time is broken up into two distinct categories: her life in India and her journey in America. During each episode of her life cultural traditions from the past interject and mark her circumstances. These movements initiate transformations that highlight the issues that Jasmine has with integrating her past into her present cultural experiences. Jasmine realizes that in order to be free from the past she must embrace the traditions that defined her as an Indian immigrant and still move forward in her quest for a “home” in America.

## CHAPTER IV

### JAMAICA KINCAID'S *LUCY*: HER PRESENT IMMIGRANT EXPERIENCE AND HER POST-COLONIAL PAST

This chapter shows how Kincaid's narrative is structured around a withdrawal from the past and all things that remind Lucy of her former home. She struggles with the images of home and mother that interrupt her immigrant experience and disrupt the development of her ethnic and gender identity. This struggle is highlighted by the women in Lucy's life. Each relationship touches upon a different aspect of her past that upsets her present. Part of her past revolves around post-colonialism and it is an integral part of her immigrant experience. For the purpose of this thesis the definition of post-colonial literature will focus on the period after colonization and the culture and gender development that are affected by displacement. As post-colonial critic Homi Bhabha believes that colonialism illustrates that the past is not stagnant, he shows how colonialism involves a process where "histories and cultures constantly intrude on the present, demanding that we transform our understanding of cross-cultural relations"( Huddart 1). As a prominent critic of post-colonialism, Bhabha believes that all cultures collided at one point or another and this creates anxiety. This emotion begins when the colonized are apprehensive about their place in the world, because of their experiences in their homeland. For Lucy her cultural anxiety manifests itself into feelings of bitterness and hostility. She cannot resolve the forced colonialism and the patriarchal environment that surrounds her in her homeland and

attempts to escape it through her immigration. Unfortunately, her past is not something she can run from and everything that she despises seems to follow her on her journey to find herself.

The journey begins when Lucy is ready to leave home and find a new life in a new world. The main character is determined to believe that things will be different if she relocates and leaves her home and her mother. Yet, from the very beginning of her journey the differences that surround her physically and culturally dishearten Lucy and fill her with memories of the past. It almost seems as if Lucy is stuck between where she came from and where she is going; an in-between. For Bhabha there is a place that in the post-colonial experience that exist in-between cultures known as the liminal. This term “stresses that what is in-between settled cultural forms or identities—identities like self and other—is central to the creation of new cultural meaning” (Huddart 5). For Lucy this term becomes an active part of her narrative. She hovers between Antigua and her new home and the feelings of not belonging in either location. Her first views of her new home reminds her of a daydream and she claims that, “all these places were points of happiness to me; all these places were lifeboats to my small drowning soul, for I would imagine myself entering and leaving them, and just that—entering and leaving over and over again” (Kincaid 3). Before she even fully arrives in her new home she is reminded of a sadness that is heavy and weighs down her ability to embrace her surroundings. The yo-yo effect that she relives reflects the in-between that is the liminal of her experience. She has the culture that she shrinks from and tries to leave and the culture that she is. When Bhabha references the location of culture, “this location is not metaphorical as opposed to literal. Instead, the location is both spatial and temporal: the luminal is often found in particular (post-colonial) social space, but also marks the constant process of creating new identities” ( Huddart 5). A part

of Lucy's immigrant experience involves the development of her cultural identity and as David Huddart mentions this is something that Bhabha believes moves between time and space.

As Kincaid's *Lucy* illustrates the attempt to create a new identity in a new cultural surrounding. Another area that Bhabha emphasizes is the combining of cultures known as hybridity. Although he claims that the ongoing process of hybridization is an attempt to still the blending of cultures in order to make individual cultures. Bhabha stresses that cultural hybridity "entertains differences without an assumed or imposed hierarchy" (8). For Kincaid the development of Lucy's cultural identity is illustrated in the hybridization of colonial Antigua and her new home in the United States. This blending of cultures begins to happen when Lucy starts to "look forward" to the future, and she begins to notice distinct similarities between her new family and the one she left behind. Lucy realizes that "the untruths in family life" do not belong exclusively to her family, but are mirrored in the family that she lives with in the United States (Kincaid 77). The reflection is reinforced when Lewis, Mariah's husband, cheats on her and immediately Lucy is reminded of her father and his infidelity. These memories of the past hover over Lucy and act as a stark reminder that things in the United States are not as different as she would like to believe. At the same time Lucy refuses to open her mother's letters and reconnect with her family in Antigua. The refusal to accept the blending of the cultures is "the negating activity...the intervention of the "beyond" that establishes a boundary: a bridge, where 'presencing' begins because it captures something of the estranging sense of the relocation of the home and the world-the unhomeliness... (Bhabha 13). The past interrupts Lucy's development and forces her into the "beyond" and remind her that she is not at home in either location.

Lucy's development as a woman is marked by the distinction between the past and the present and the nostalgia and what she experiences when the past interrupts her present. In

Katherine Sugg and Rey Chow's "I Would Rather Be Dead": Nostalgia and Narrative in Jamaica Kincaid's *Lucy*" they argue that "Lucy's anger and despair result more from her experiences of "home" than of her experiences of leaving home. This difference points to the fundamental roles played by gender and sexuality in discourses of exile and blurs the plots of desire that uphold dominant (colonial, patriarchal, and nationalist) narratives of exile and cultural identity"(157). Lucy's past does not trigger a sense of melancholy, it triggers a sense of bitterness and anger at a culture that was forced upon her and that she happily fled. At times it seems as if the process of remembering her post-colonial past is strategic. As if the flashbacks are meant to justify her decision to leave her family and her home. At these critical moments in the narrative it becomes apparent that her memories link the women in her life to her post colonial experience. The connection to her past, to her mother, and to Mariah help develop her narrative.

Jamaica Kincaid's *Lucy* illustrates the conflict that exists when an individual attempts to ignore key elements of their past in order to survive in the present. Lucy is a vibrant young woman who is rebelling against the post colonial norms that surrounded her in the West Indies. In the beginning of the novel Lucy is trying to process the change from her home country to America and she compares the event to the change in climate. Her arrival occurs during the coldest time of the year and this reflects the fear and confusion that she suffers during the beginning of her immigrant experience. She adjusts to this fear and confusion that bombard her senses by embracing the physical and emotional differences of American culture. Yet, she is constantly reminded of who she is and where she came from. Nature seems to mock her attempts to accept the changes around her and repeatedly reminds her of the culture she is trying to erase. Lucy's memories are a constant reminder of the cultural differences that separate her from her new surroundings. Jamaica Kincaid's narrative structure revolves around Lucy's

interaction with other female characters, specifically her mother. The roles that women play in this immigrant narrative directly correlates with the power that the past has in defining Lucy's gender identity. This interaction with important females in her life fuels the response she has to her physical environment and her cultural environment with varying degrees of hostility, confusion, and fear. Lucy acknowledges from the beginning that her immigrant experience begins with a feeling of nostalgia; yet it quickly transforms and she no longer seeks to return home.

Lucy's mother is the foundation of her immigrant experience, her cultural identity and her gender identity. It becomes apparent from the very beginning of her narrative that "her struggle for personal freedom and independence entails total, self-imposed separation from her family, particular her mother, and a commitment to complete detachment" (Oczkowicz 143). She believes that leaving her home will help her to change her identity. Lucy attempts to ignore the fact that her hybrid cultural identity exists. She bitterly disavows the mixing of cultures that resulted from her post-colonial experience. Unfortunately, she realizes almost immediately that her thoughts, feelings and discontent travel with her to her new home (Kincaid 7). She experiences a brief moment of nostalgia and desires to return to the familiar. Yet, this feeling does not seem to last and Lucy acknowledges that a part of her need to find a new home stems from her love/hate relationship with her mother. Her post-colonial experience and the development of her gender identity are reflected in her connection to her mother. This reflection illustrates the oppression she feels from her post-colonial education and the oppression she feels from her mother's desire to mold her into a reproduction of herself. As a result, Lucy immediately begins to distance herself from her mother and her home. She refuses to respond to any correspondence from Antigua in the hope that if she puts as much time and space between

herself and her past she will not feel the effects of the temporal border. In other words, she will not “see hundreds of years in every gesture, every word spoken, every face” (Kincaid 31). She tries to avoid the past in order to enjoy the present. Sadly, this is something that is almost impossible to accomplish. She sees her mother in everything that she loves about Mariah and everything that she hates. At one point, Mariah is surrounded by flowers and Lucy is at once reminded of her mother’s love of plants and the beauty of her hands as they worked and gestured. She tells Mariah that the flowers should be strewn over a naked body so that they can be smelled and appreciated forever (Kincaid 59). Simultaneously, she realizes that the moment she shares with Mariah is one that could never happen with her mother. The past interrupts her present immigrant experience with memories of her mother and prevents her from simply enjoying the moment. She realizes that sexuality and gender issues were forbidden unless they involved the repression of her desires.

As the narrative progresses the conflict that Lucy has with her mother and the implications that this has on the concept of time and its importance to the narrative intensifies. It begins to parallel the development of her gender identity. At one point in the narrative she fears that she might be pregnant and the past interrupts her sexual encounter with Hugh. She is suddenly filled with “confusion and dread” because she remembers when her sexuality became something she could not hide from her mother. She was twelve years old and she noticed that she had hair under her arms and she tried to scrub the hair off (Kincaid 68). Lucy tried to erase the signs of her sexuality because it was something that she knew would change her life forever. She wanted to hide that side of herself from her mother and everyone else that knew her. It was as if she was ashamed of her sexuality. Her mother even goes so far as to curtsy to Lucy after she teaches her which herbs would cause her to have her period in case the unexpected occurred. To

Lucy this was a sign that her sexuality needed to remain “polite” and dignified, something that Lucy refused to permit. She immediately seeks to relinquish her innocence and delve into a world that embraced her sexuality and her new found freedom. Part of this change occurs on her small island and the other part continues in her new home with her new family.

The family unit takes on a significant role in defining Lucy’s struggle with her post-colonial past. Lucy’s character takes on the responsibilities of caring for Mariah’s four young daughters and almost immediately feels trapped in a box. This box is the literal room she lives in and the figurative box that separates her from embracing her new home. The walls consist of the harsh memories of her past that prevent her from enjoying the new world around her. She questions whether she will ever face a day in her new home without being reminded of her family. The contrast between the welcome reception she received from her new found family and the cold distance she perceives from her original family leave Lucy sad and confused. The difficulty that Lucy faces in the beginning of her immigrant experience revolves around the internal struggle she faces as a colonized individual. According to Maria Helena Lima author of “Imaginary Homelands in Jamaica Kincaid’s Narratives of Development” Kincaid’s “post-colonial protagonist is trapped within a futile but continuous process of gesturing towards the “source” of identity, towards the grounds of cultural origins, towards conflicting images of home” (860) Lucy’s immigrant narrative continually illustrates her emotional conflicts with home and how neither her new home nor her old home provide solace for her. Unfortunately this story of moral, cultural, and psychological development exposes the improbability of all immigrants, (in this case Lucy) to find a balance between her past with her present. When she begins to work for Mariah she notices that the family is identical in looks and beliefs and their perfection seems unnatural. Lucy compares them to a bouquet of flowers that are strewn



throughout the house, clustered and decorative. Each picture of the family captures a moment; that to Lucy is unnatural in their perception of the world as a wonderful place. She seems to mock the family's view on life when she notices that, "Even when a little rain fell, they would admire the way it streaked through the blank air" (Kincaid 13). She seems to equate their ability to 'smile at the world' as a flaw in their character and a weakness in the simplicity of their life. She has moved from a world that was unyielding in its desire to manipulate and change her, to a world that accepts everything that is different as wonderful.

Mariah and "spring" carry a harsh reminder of the post-colonial past that interrupts Lucy's immigrant experience. In an attempt to help Lucy adjust to her new environment, Mariah tries to share her joy in "spring". She uses daffodils to illustrate the beauty of nature and its awe inspiring life force that makes Mariah feel alive (Kincaid 18). Lucy tries to relate to Mariah's connection to daffodils and instead encounters a temporal border that prevents her from understanding Mariah's joy. She immediately relates the daffodils to her post-colonial experience and the oppression she felt as she was forced to learn at the Queen Victoria's Girl School. Mariah proceeds to describe the daffodils blossoming in the spring and for Lucy, "the image of daffodils curtsying *en masse* suggest the very conformity to femininity, etiquette, and social rules of decorum that Lucy scorns and resists" ( Braziel 115). She resents the reminder of her repressed sexuality and the gender identity forced on her by her post-colonial experience. For Lucy her post-colonial education does not offer her salvation from Antiquan life, but a deep disappointment in, "recognizing who she was told and made to be" versus "who she actually is, and who she wants or does not want to become" (Oczkowicz 145). While Mariah endeavors to create a relationship with Lucy, Lucy is torn between what she experiences and what she remembers from her past. The anger that Lucy associates with Whitman's poetry resurfaces with

the presence of the daffodils in his poetry and now in Mariah's "spring". She is unable to appreciate Mariah's view of nature because all she sees is the suffocating presence of the daffodils and how they completely consume her. This moment in her narrative illustrates Lucy's attempt to repress her postcolonial experience and the reality that her past cannot be erased from her cultural identity.

Mariah offers Lucy a friendship that goes beyond that of employee and employer; it is one that truly involves love and affection, but not understanding. Where Mariah sees beauty and life, Lucy sees pain and bitterness. Lucy sees in Mariah something foreign and strange; an individual that has never had to face reality and never know disappointment (Kincaid 26). Even after the episode with the daffodils and the memory of Whitman's poem, Mariah determines that Lucy must see the actual flowers. She shares her garden with Lucy in the hopes that she will see passed the past and how it separates her immigrant experience. Instead of bonding with Mariah, Lucy "cast her beloved daffodils in a scene she [Mariah] had never considered, a scene of conquered and conquests; a scene of brutes masquerading as angels and angels portrayed as brutes" (Kincaid 30). The space that separates these two women grows as the past becomes a mental border that forces Lucy's post-colonial experience to interrupt her present encounter with daffodils. She is unable to see passed her post-colonial education and the break in her experience creates a temporary silence in her relationship with Mariah. Yet, Mariah's character continues to place Lucy in situations that are disrupted by her past. On the way to the house on the lake Mariah is ready to show Lucy the "freshly plowed fields" and Lucy reacts ruthlessly with "...thank God I didn't have to do that" (Kincaid 33). That one sentence has multiple meanings for Lucy; meanings that Mariah will never comprehend. Lucy's cultural experiences add a maturity and hostility to her character that separate her from her new family.

The fact that Mariah begins to remind Lucy of her mother adds to Lucy's sense of dread and loneliness. They both have a desire to make Lucy see things their way and Lucy resents being molded into the shape of any individual but herself. Yet, at the same time "Mariah serves as a surrogate mother for Lucy in this transitional moment of her liberation and self-invention. She makes up for the shortcomings of Lucy's real mother" (Oczkowicz 148). Lucy is able to discuss things with Mariah that she could never mention in front of her mother. For example, her sexuality begins to develop in Antigua, but she could never share her experiences with her mother. In Mariah she finds someone that will listen to her "express and discuss her sexuality...without being repressed by the overpowering sense of moral propriety" (Oczkowicz 148). Lucy is aware that she can express herself more freely with Mariah and yet with this awareness comes the knowledge that a space exists between them that is marked by time and place. Lucy's position as a domestic servant hovers as a reminder of the roles that each woman plays in society. Once again Mariah's role as employer places her in a position of power that is very similar to the one that Lucy's mother holds over her. When Lucy is reminded of this distinction she is resentful of the similarities. The resemblance she sees in Mariah also acts as a catalyst to remind her that she is also a reflection of her mother.

During the mirroring stages of development Freud and Lacan claim that a child's understanding of who they are is directly influenced by the images of others and of themselves. For Lucy the development of her body image and ultimately her gender identity revolve around her understanding of the world around her and her connection to her mother. Towards the end of Lucy's employment with Mariah she begins to suffer from bouts of loneliness and "violent headaches". Her first reaction is an overwhelming fear that she has the same affliction as her mother and she is immediately transported to the past. This time the pain of her migraine

reminds her of the pain she inflicted on her mother as she wished for her death. Lucy realizes her antagonism for her mother was a reflection of how important her mother was to her and how great her desire was to “erase her” (Kincaid 94). As Lucy’s mother erased her, by dismissing her as a “girl” who was unworthy of evoking a sense of pride. The fact that Lucy was aware that she and her mother were “identical” only fueled Lucy’s sense of betrayal and anger. Here was the only person that Lucy felt understood her as an individual and yet she sets her daughter aside as her three sons come into the world to become educated and successful. Lucy’s gender identity is based on her connection to her mother and goes beyond “history and culture and other women in general” (Kincaid 132). When she attempts to share her past with Mariah, Mariah fails to understand that Lucy’s concept of gender does not focus on the differences between men and women, but on the inability of her mother to see her as more than just a female. Not only is Lucy traumatized by her mother’s dismissal, but it affects every aspect of her development in her new home. In fact, every time Lucy experiences a headache the reflection in the mirror shows her mother’s face, “a face that was godlike, for it seemed to know its own origins, to know all the things of which it was made” (Kincaid 94). Her mother’s sense of self is something that Lucy lacks and is constantly in search of. She realizes that leaving home was just one beginning in her journey to reinvent herself and at the end of her narrative she moves towards a new beginning.

## CHAPTER V

### CONCLUSION

In this thesis I proved that the past intrudes on the present immigrant experience and as a result, complicates the development of gender and ethnic identity. I focus on how these narratives develop, in the form of short vignettes that highlight legends and stories, in the form of different places and names, and finally in the form of a complete retreat from the past. Each one takes a different narrative structure to arrive at the same basic conclusions; that the present immigrant experience will always be impacted by the cultural past. In the choice of Maxine Hong Kingston's *Woman Warrior*, Mukherjee's *Jasmine*, and Jamaica Kincaid's *Lucy* I illustrate how the female characters come from different cultures and how they all struggle with the same conflicts with ethnic identity and the same complications with gender development. Homi Bhabha's defines the impact of the past on the present as something that "does not merely recall the past as social cause or aesthetic precedent; it renews the past, refiguring it as a contingent 'in-between' space, that innovates and interrupts the performance of the present. The 'past-present' becomes part of the necessity, not the nostalgia, of living" (Bhabha 10). The past has a claim on the present immigrant experience and this claim marks the development of gender and ethnic identity; therefore, the immigrant encounter is defined by the past.

Each chapter contains an analysis of how these three writers illustrate the impact that the past has on the main character's development. In chapter two I argue that the main character deals with the immigrant experience through her mother's personal trauma with leaving China. I wanted to illustrate that the conflicts that plague a first generation immigrant are sometimes

carried over to their children. In her narrative I prove that if one acknowledges the presence of the past then it can be a healing process. If one does not adapt to the past in the present, as with Moon Orchid, then it can have devastate repercussions. It halts the development of both gender and ethnic identity. In chapter three I illustrate how the past and its intrusion on the present cannot be controlled. In Mukherjee's *Jasmine* I analyze her narrative in the chronological stages of her development and expose how Jasmine's post-colonial past and ethnic history disrupts the various stages of her immigrant experience. In chapter four I illustrate how Jamaica Kincaid's *Lucy* becomes a blend of the previous two chapters, she reminds the reader of Kingston in her relationship with her mother and like Jasmine, she eagerly accepts the new experiences that surround her. Lucy's attempt to block the past and cut it out completely from her present backfires and leaves her with the knowledge that is illustrated in all of the narratives: an immigrant's cultural past will intervene in their present.

The struggle to find a balance between cultures that bridge "the beyond" and actively generate a development of gender identity is present in each narrative. How can immigrants that are struggling to survive in a foreign environment successfully find a balance between cultures? Is there a key to bridging the gap between gender development and the cultural expectations that mark an immigrant's growth? Butler's theory on gender identity stresses that "the culturally enmired subject negotiates its constructions, even when those constructions are the very predicates of its own identity (182). My argument is that the function of the past during the immigrant experience is to act as a catalyst that spoils the balance between the 'then' and the 'now.' Cultural and personal history can make an already difficult situation even more unbearable for the immigrant. The failure to embrace the past and hybridize cultures is instructive: what social theory will build from the exasperation that female immigrants

experience during their quest to find a new “home”? Is complete assimilation the only option? Or is there truly a method to finding a complete balance between cultures? Can gender identity develop when a subject is not situated and stable? I argue that these narratives illustrate the almost impossible task of negotiating between two cultural fields and finding a balance that helps construct gender and ethnic identity.

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## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Rachel M. Puckett was raised in Houston, Texas until the age of twelve. Her parents decided to return to their hometown of Mercedes in the Rio Grande Valley and she attended Mercedes Junior High and then South Texas High School for Health Professions. She went on to attend the University of Texas Pan American and graduated in May of 1997 with a degree in English. After college she began teaching at Med High and a year later began working on a master degree in secondary education. She completed her master's course work and graduated in 2002. Almost seven years later she decided to go back to college and work on a degree in literature and culture. She graduated with a Master of Arts degree in English in December of 2012. She has been teaching high school English for almost sixteen years at South Texas High School for Health Professions and composition 1301 and 1302 at South Texas College for ten years. Her greatest joys in life are her family and her faith. Teaching for her is not a job it is her passion.