Possible Selves:
Female Identity in Postmodern Ethnic American Literature

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Introduction

The discourse of identity is often linked to the issues of ethnicity and femininity. But these are just two reference points out of a wide range of possible associations. A couple of days ago I stumbled across a video on the internet, showing Alice Walker joining two representatives of Emory University in singing “Lift Every Voice and Sing”, a song that is often referred to as “The Black National Anthem” and that Askew describes “as a symbol of every American voice” (Askew 2011, online). My curiosity was aroused. Alice Walker is standing there singing an African American song together with students of Emory University. I could not help but noticing the strong image that is conveyed there: The author is an inspiration for many women all over the world, she is a symbol of feminism. But there is more to it: She is proud of her heritage, her ethnic background. She radiates a strength that enables her to show the world who she is: An African American woman, an author and an idol. This example perfectly explains my fascination with identity and the reason for this paper. We do not have just one characteristic feature. We are the result of everything around us and of our choices. Hence, the main research question is the following: How is identity, in this case especially female identity, constructed? Furthermore, the sense of belonging plays a crucial role. Alice Walker clearly feels comfortable to publicly show her devotion for her culture by singing this song in a university. Consequently, I will also ask the following question: How do we find out where we belong to? It is therefore not surprising that this topic has fascinated not just me, but numerous people at all times all over the world in reality or fiction. Bharati Mukherjee, for example, deals with the topic of identity in her novel *Jasmine*. Sandra Cisneros explores the Chicano identity in *The House on Mango Street* as well as Gloria Anzaldúa, who shares her experiences as a Mexican lesbian in *Borderlands/La Frontera*. These books are just the tip of the iceberg, many more have been written. As can be seen it is not just this interest of mine in this topic, but the fact that all of us are on a never-ending search of finding ourselves or at least of trying to understand who we are that shaped the ideas for this paper.

Let us start with one straightforward definition of identity offered by John E. Joseph: “Put as simple as possible, your identity is who you are” (2004: 1). Of course he was aware that this explanation raises even more questions, when we begin to ask ourselves “But who exactly am I?” Throughout times the understanding of identity has changed significantly. In
the 19th century, for example, it was dictated which self you have to acquire. “Victorian ideals associated with modernization taught people to work hard, to postpone gratification, to repress themselves sexually, to ‘improve’ themselves, to be sober, conscientious, even compulsive” (Howe 1975: 521). In the 19th century these values and ideals were of great importance, which is the reason why the “Victorian culture was profoundly didactic” (cf. Howe 1975: 526). There were high expectations of every individual that they had to live up to, especially concerning women: Even though women were idealized, there was a role they had to fulfill:

The mother was an acknowledged guardian of moral, religious, and other cultural values among American Victorians, and the home was her sphere of influence. She was expected to operate to a large extent through emotional conditioning, conceding to her husband superiority in the ultimately more important domain of reason (Howe 1975: 530).

A deviation from the accepted norm usually resulted in punishment. According to Campbell the 1950’s proved to be another difficult time for women. The post-war generation in America saw itself in a contradictory situation: On the one hand women were needed in the workplace and on the other hand they were expected to fulfill their domestic duties (cf. Campbell 1997: 212). Basically, women were still forced into a category that would imprint an identity on them without being able to choose. Betty Friedan, a representative of the 2nd wave of feminism, explains the situation as follows: “They learned that truly feminine women do not want careers, higher education, political rights – the independence and opportunities that the old-fashioned feminists fought for [...] All they had to do was devote their lives from earliest girlhood to finding husband and bearing children” (1963: 16). As a consequence, women were extremely dissatisfied with their lives. Friedan called it the “problem that has no name”. Since then feminist discussions have been spurred and the situation for women has improved. Theoretically, women are free to explore their identity nowadays, because they have a choice. They do not need to fear sanction or contempt. This development of course altered the understanding of identity, which I will now discuss.

A more modern definition of the term identity is formulated by Kevin Robins: “Dominant and conventional discourses [...] make the assumption that the identity and distinctiveness of a person or a group is the expression of some inner essence or property” (2005: 173). This ‘inner essence of property’ could be equaled with the true self, the quintessence of our personalities. Based on this theory, we can assume that our identity can be defined and localized because of this essence. However, this concept was replaced by the
postmodern idea that a constant change takes place within ourselves which rules out any so-called true core that would enable us to pinpoint our identity. Instead, this new approach suggested that all identities incorporate a “socially constructed status” (cf. Robins 2005: 173). According to Robins, “identities are seen to be instituted in particular social and historical contexts, to be strategic fictions, having to react to changing circumstances, and therefore subject to continuous change and reconfiguration” (2005: 173), which is similar to Sim’s statement concerning identity. He suggests that, “the subject is a fragmented being who has no essential core of identity, and is to be regarded as a process in a continual state of dissolution rather than a fixed identity or self that endures unchanged over time.” (2005: 312). The aforementioned theoretical approach implies that the subject possesses a variety of possible selves. Now that I have touched upon the main idea for my thesis I will briefly introduce the primary texts and their importance for my research.

Firstly, Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* deals with the story of Pecola, an African American girl who is considered ugly and is left to deal with rejection all by herself. Morrison portrays the effect that beauty standards of a white society can have on a little black girl’s identity, which is why I decided to choose this book. Secondly, Maxine Hong Kingston tells us in *The Woman Warrior* of her childhood and adolescence as well as her adult life and the complications to grow up with traditional Chinese parents in modern America. Kingston deals with the issue of identity slightly different in the sense that her protagonist has to find her place between the Chinese and the American world. The time in which both books were published needs to be taken into consideration when analyzing the stories. Up to the 1970’s the majority of authors shared the characteristic features of being white and male. However, this changed when women and ethnic writers were finally acknowledged:

> It was especially the art, writing, film-making and criticism of women and minority artists with their recuperation of buried and mutilated traditions, their emphasis on exploring forms of gender- and race-based subjectivity in aesthetic productions and experiences, and their refusal to be limited to standard canonizations, which added a whole new dimension to the critique of high modernism and to the emergence of alternative forms of culture (Huyssen 1986: 198).

I have chosen two books written by women with a different cultural background, because as female authors with ethnic roots in the 70’s they represent a new era of awareness. The questions associated with this new approach to literature are: What is their message? What does a woman who has a different cultural background have to say during a time when her
voice was not heard everywhere? Which new perspectives will open when reading their stories?

Taking the different protagonists and settings of the primary texts into account, we can nevertheless already notice that there is a connection between the two stories based on their ethnic background. The following research questions concerning identity will play an important role in this paper: The true self is rejected in Postmodernism. So what are the possible selves that the characters have acquired throughout the story? Which events/occurrences triggered their acquisition? Why? Why is postmodernist literature so fascinated with questions of identity and gender, in particular? The protagonists have an important characteristic feature in common: They go through a process of transformation throughout the story. However, it is the How that points out the different outcomes of their change. They both have a unique past, a unique social environment and unique ways of dealing with the American culture which shape their identity and which I will discuss more accurately in the following chapters. Based on these thoughts, the aim of this paper is to demonstrate that the two female protagonists possess a variety of possible selves. As has been pointed out before, the latter are part of one’s identity, which in these two texts are acquired or influenced by going through a process of dealing with the past, adapting to American culture and finding a new home. The complexity of this concept will form the basis for the fascination of the issue of identity in postmodern literature.

As I have mentioned before the sense of belonging is closely linked to identity since it is due to personal preferences that we are able to identify with certain groups or places. The concept of belonging usually implies that the subject has found a home – this could be a place or a group of people – which enables him/her to fit in. Ideally, a home is the place where we can nurture our souls and develop our identity. It offers security and warmth as well as comfort. However, having a home or finding home is a privilege that not everyone is given. Hence, I will focus on the following questions: What does home mean for the characters in the novel? Where/How do they find “home”? In order to answer these questions I will refer to Virginia Woolf, Mohanty as well as bell hooks who have developed different approaches to the concept of home and hence the development of identity. The two protagonists struggle to find a home in the beginning, but are eventually able to find solutions for their “homelessness”.

Additionally, since migration is of great importance in a world of globalization, I focus on bi-national subjects who are forced to live in two worlds. First, I would like to clarify the term Ethnicity: “Indexing a range of non-biological communal identifications, including nationality, religion, history, language, and culture, it is simultaneously treated as separate from race, and as overlapping with it” (Murji 2005: 112). As can be seen, the vague definition of the term already reveals the complication concerning the discourse of race. It is a sensitive topic at a time, where numerous people leave their countries and spread out all over the world. The co-occurrence of different nationalities conditions a heightened awareness for ethnic-specific problems, which leads to the next important term: multiculturalism. “The burgeoning language of multiculturalism signals a heightened awareness of and concern with the increasingly problematic and disjunctive relationship between, race, ethnicity, and national identity” (Ang 2005: 227). However, the meaning of the term still remains vague, “it refers generally to the dilemmas and difficulties of the politics of difference” (Ang 2005: 227). The current situation of migrants is indeed a difficult one, according to Manning:

In the twentieth century, attempts were made to eliminate divisions within countries. The techniques for unifying nations varied greatly. One strategy for creating unity was known as ‘the melting pot’, which suggested an approach of mutual accommodation where various ethnic groups would gradually change to resemble each other. Another, somewhat different strategy was assimilation, which required minority groups to give up their traditions and adopt a dominant culture – this was known as ‘Americanization’ and ‘Russification’ in those two countries. (2012: 171)

As a consequence, migrants with a different cultural background face problems concerning identity specific to their situation as it is the case with Pecola and Maxine. Their identity is shaped because of the differences concerning their ethnic roots. Again, the notion of belonging plays a crucial role here:

If a migration took place long ago, the tie of diasporic community to the homeland is conceptual rather than practical. The links are maintained not so much by the movements of young people as by the memories and traditions of older people. (Manning 2012: 167)

Here we can already sense the problematic discrepancy between cultural background or traditions and the “other world”, a place that differs from the familiar surroundings and hence evokes an uncomfortable feeling, but it is also tempting because of its foreignness and therefore exciting. A concept that is of great importance here is that of “Other/Otherness”, defined by Wolfrey:

Term employed throughout critical discourse in differing ways, otherness names the quality or state of existence of being other or different from established norms and social
groups; the distinction that one makes between one’s self and others, particularly in terms of sexual, ethnic and relational senses of difference (2002: 74).

What this means for one’s identity is explained by Featherstone, who states that the establishment of a multicultural society will force subjects with different backgrounds to draw boundaries between themselves and others (cf. 1995: 114). Or as Madsen puts it, “what is emphasized is the desire to belong and to know where one belongs” (2006: 101). Belonging is the key word when it comes to migration. Some reject their cultural baggage and others carry it with pride. The latter does not necessarily mean that the different traditions and customs of the new country are ignored. However, the task of finding a place between two cultures is undoubtedly a difficult one. Another important term in this context is double-consciousness, which is described as “the self-estrangement resulting from competing allegiances in racial or ethnic terms” (Matterson 2003: 65). Especially second-generation writers are affected by this phenomenon, because their “perceived cultural task may be to become American yet also to maintain an ethnic identity that may be devalued or not recognized in mainstream American culture” (Matterson 2003: 65). Of course, when I talk about double-consciousness I am obliged to refer to W.E.B. Du Bois who describes this concept as follows:

It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder (1903: 9).

Double-consciousness can also be applied to other ethnic identities as well. Apart from African Americans, Chinese, Indians, etc. may experience the same sensation when living in America. Later on, we will see in what ways the protagonists react to their new circumstances and how their social environment perceives them. When it comes to cultural backgrounds a subtle diversity is offered by the protagonists: Maxine is Chinese-American and Pecola has an African-American background, which enables us to compare their experiences. They both have to face oppression of some kind, but the extent of which differs tremendously. Therefore, I will focus on the following questions: What kind of cultural conflicts do the protagonists encounter? In what way do the primary texts by Morrison and Kingston reflect the cultural and social backdrop against which they were written?

Connected to the discussion of culture and its representation is the question concerning the discrepancy between fiction and reality. Every fictional story claims to be a
representation of reality to a certain extent. Kingston has written a semi-autobiographical novel, of which we can assume that it is based on some real occurrences, even though her memories are not always accurate. The Bluest Eye, however, is purely fictitious and does not refer to real life events. According to Nünning, “literary texts do not merely imitate extra-literary contexts; instead, reality and literary texts are in dynamic interplay” (2004: 16-17). This observation opens a new discussion: Which function do the female protagonists have in the two novels? Are they supposed to epitomize a type of female (ethnic) identity that seems representative of actual women? These questions lead us to the next theme, I would like to introduce: gender equality.

Even though the term gender equality spread all over the world and has influenced numerous laws, the goal has not been achieved yet. But what exactly is the gender discussion about? The idea is to “expose a seemingly neutral analysis as male oriented and [...] to turn critical attention from men to women” (Halberstam 2007: 116). Furthermore, Halberstam states that “gender is understood as a marker of social difference, a bodily performance of normativity and the challenges made to it” (2007: 118). The issue of gender is a complex one and there are numerous different approaches to this sensitive topic. But what does the situation look like today? According to a recent article published in the New York Times, “after two steps forward, we were unprepared for the abrupt slowdown on the road to gender equality” (Cohen 2013). Even now in 2013/14 the discussion of gender issues is still going on and this is why I decided to focus on the identity problems women encounter. Questions I will address in this paper concerning female identity are the following: How is gender per se negotiated in the novels? What about masculinity? It will become apparent that the described situations of women in the primary texts do not necessarily imply that life is far more complicated for women than for their male counterpart. Women rather encounter various difficulties, for example when they are forced to live up to expectations of a certain role or stereotype that is conveyed through the media. In one of Betty Friedan’s interviews one woman stated “I’m desperate. I begin to feel I have no personality. I’m a server of food and a putter-on of pants and a bedmaker, somebody who can be called on when you want something. But who am I?” (1963: 21). Campbell refers to that statement and explains: “Although a voice from the 1960’s, such a statement could have come from the more recent past, for women still struggle against this kind of desperate limitation of their identities in a domestic, patriarchal world” (1997: 224), which is exactly
what I will attempt to show in my paper. Furthermore, I will discuss what effects this has on their identity. However, we have to keep in mind that not every problem is a universal one that every woman has to face.

The huge variety of the different themes suggests more than one theoretical approach. First of all, a structuralist approach offers an acceptable solution for the analysis of the plot development. The structure of the plot affects the protagonists and hence their identity. I will look at the two primary texts and see whether the plot structure is similar or not and which effects the differences impose on the texts. Also, there is an underlying message that is conveyed through the way the plot is constructed, to which I will pay particular attention. Another important aspect I need to mention here is the narrative device that Kingston and Morrison use. I will analyze and compare the two devices, which will reveal the connection between the two texts on a meta-narrative level. An interesting concept that I will make use of is structural anthropology. “Structural anthropology, created by Claude Lévi-Strauss in the late 1950’s, seeks the underlying common denominators, the structures, that link all human beings regardless of the differences among the surface phenomena of the cultures to which they belong” (Tyson 2006: 215). This interesting theoretical approach offers the opportunity to see which characteristics both protagonists have in common despite their ethnic differences. Tyson then further explains:

The existence of structural similarities among seemingly different myths of different cultures was one of Lévi-Strauss’s particular areas of interest. His goal was to discover when ‘different’ myths are actually different versions of the same myth in order to show that human beings from very different cultures share structures of consciousness that project themselves in the formation of structurally similar myths (Tyson 2006: 215).

As a consequence, I will have a close look at the way the two protagonists deal with American indoctrination and its culture in general.

Connected to structuralism to some extent is the reader-response approach, because both theories attribute great importance to the underlying structure of a text. The primary texts evoke strong emotions in the reader whether because of sensitive topics such as race or the mere injustice the characters encounter. I will especially focus on the aesthetics of the texts and its effect on the reader. For this reason, I will follow a reader-oriented approach. As Tyson points out, “a written text is not an object, despite its physical existence, but an event that occurs within the reader, whose response is of primary importance in creating the text” (2006: 172). The last one I want to apply is called context-oriented approach, an
important method to refer to real life discourses such as gender issues, racism etc, which both play a crucial role in the two primary texts.

**Possible Selves and the Process of Identity Formation**

The protagonists of the primary texts undergo significant changes throughout the stories, which are evoked not only by external but also internal factors. Baumeister and Muraven point out that “societies clearly play an important causal role in creating and shaping identity” (1996: 405). A person’s identity is for example shaped by their immediate social environment including family and relationships as well as friendships, their home country and the political situation there, their cultural background and traditions and possible conflicts related to that, and their dreams or wishes and whether they are fulfilled or not. Failure, success, disappointment, happiness etc. are influenced by external factors such as mentioned before which in turn affect one’s personality. However, Baumeister and Muraven mention an interesting point, namely, that even though the social context influences a person’s identity, the subjects still have a choice and can affect their identity themselves (cf. 1996: 405), which would be an internal influential factor. The protagonists of *The Bluest Eye* and *The Woman Warrior* are exposed to a different social context but experience the same outcome: personal change.

As has been mentioned before, the idea of a true self is rejected in postmodernism. However, there is a plurality of selves within one person, which is a reference to the complex construction of our identity. I will introduce myself to offer an exemplification: I am not just a young woman, but also white or more explicitly an Austrian. I am also a student at university. Based on this minimal amount of information we are able to abstract the following possible selves: The female self, the Austrian self, and the academic self, which immediately evoke associations within the reader. These selves are part of my identity as they are of a lot more women in Austria. However, that does not imply that these women have a similar life. The context or the circumstances shape the possible selves. To make this more explicit I will offer another example: The female self of woman A, a successful business woman, and the female self of woman B, a loving mother, differ substantially from each other. The former probably struggles to maintain more control in a men dominated company as a woman, whereas the latter might fulfill her motherly duties with affection, but...
both attempt to find their place as a woman in society. As a consequence, we are not born with a set of fixed selves, but rather acquire them throughout our lives, which is why our immediate social environment is of such great importance. As it is the case with the two women in my examples, they have a choice. Baumeister and Muraven explain this phenomenon as follows:

We propose that the relationship of identity to social context be understood in terms of adaptation. More precisely individual identity is an adaptation to a social context. The concept of adaptation is useful because it does not imply mere passive acquisition of identity by individuals, but it also does not overstate the scope of self-determination. History, culture, and the proximate structure of social relations create a context in which the individual identity must exist. People have individual wants and needs that must be satisfied within that context. Individuals actively choose, alter, and modify their identities based on what will enable them to get along best in that context (1996: 405).

Woman A chooses a career, whereas woman B chooses her family, but both act within the same context, for example the Western society. Their identity has to be developed within the frame of conventions set by a certain society, but there are still options left when it comes to self-realization. These decisions have a direct influence on the identity of the two individuals.

There are numerous examples that implicitly expose the complexity of identity development. Women, for example, are also able to acquire a male self, if they grew up among men or were influenced by dominant male leaders. The extent to which their male self develops depends on their personal preferences. On the other hand, it is possible for men to find their female self as well. When we look at the multicultural society then our understanding of identity is challenged even further. A woman with an Indian background who grows up in the US may look like a foreigner and may know Indian customs etc., but she will also be able to develop an American self. As a matter of fact, we possess numerous possible selves and so do the protagonists of the primary texts.

I also want to focus on the change of identity, which requires looking at the possible selves and seeing if they have changed during the story or if they have remained the same. The characters may develop a new self or reject an existing one, which is an essential process if a person aims to find out who he/she is. It is not possible to predict what a certain event or situation changes in a person’s identity, but we are nevertheless able to analyze the outcome and trace back to its catalyst. Especially the struggle between the American self and the self that is based on a different cultural background is of great interest. I want to point out that I chose to analyze only a small number of possible selves, which are of great
significance for the change of identity, but these are by far not all. Moreover, there are no strict boundaries between one possible self and another since they are all connected to each other to some extent. I will exemplify what this means by the Indian woman living in America who I have mentioned before. Her female self will be influenced by her Indian self or American self, depending on the way she was raised or the treatment she had to face in the past. As a matter of fact, possible selves are not static. They continuously change whether in their development or their dominating power. For exemplification, let us assume that the Indian woman feels more connected to her American self because of the culture or the people she has met. As a result, her Indian self retracts, which does not mean that this part of her identity disappears. It is still there and might grow stronger when the woman decides to have a traditional Indian wedding. As has been mentioned before, the circumstances and personal choices shape our identity, which consists of numerous possible selves that are hence also subject of change.

**The Bluest Eye: The Consequences of Idealized Beauty Standards and the Power of Imagination**

In *The Bluest Eye* Toni Morrison shows us the devastating effects society can have on a little black girl’s identity and hence her possible selves. Pecola, the African-American protagonist, is fascinated by the conveyed image of the beautiful white woman of which she seems to be the opposite in every aspect. She is a little black girl with wooly black hair, narrow eyes and a crooked nose (cf. 36), whereas the overall consensus in the story is that only blonde white girls with blue eyes are beautiful. Throughout the story Pecola develops several selves, but also rejects some parts of her identity. I would like to mention that every state or change Pecola finds herself in can be linked to the idealized beauty standards she is exposed to. Because of her ethnicity Pecola has developed an African American self, a part of her identity that is primarily based on her experiences as a black girl. The way Pecola perceives her ethnic self depends on the reaction of her social environment and her resulting self-perception. However, it is not just the lack of beauty but also the lack of her personal strength that makes her the ultimate victim of her social environment. Therefore, I will also focus on the passive self of Pecola that she has acquired because of her willingness to accept
every situation without questioning it. And finally I will discuss the acquisition of the
dreaming self, which will eventually give her some power of her own. It has to be mentioned
that the African American self is one that Pecola is aware of to a certain extent, whereas the
other two are parts of her identity that are primarily functioning on a subconscious level. Her
main concern is the struggle with her African American self, because it contradicts the
beauty standards of the white society on which she defines herself and determines her
value. The obsession with it prevents her from seeing other selves that exist within her.
These other parts of her identity could have been helpful in strengthening her self-
perception. Even though the reader is only offered short glimpses into the mind of Pecola,
they are able to perceive that Pecola is more than an object whose worth depends on the
judgment of others. Morrison offers the readers several perspectives that make them see
Pecola’s life from different angles, which in turn helps to understand the identity struggles
Pecola has to face. The external circumstances are told by Claudia and an omniscient
narrator. The different narrative devices help to understand the composition of Pecola’s
possible selves. Firstly, I will introduce the African American self and the importance of it in
the protagonist’s life.

The African American Self: America’s Idealized Beauty Standards and Pecola’s
Self-perception

By telling the story of a black girl, Morrison challenges white dominated literary conventions
of the 1970’s, which is, according to Hutcheon, characteristic for the postmodern era:

The center no longer holds. And, from the decentered perspective, the “marginal” and
what I will be calling [...] the “ex-centric” (be it in class, race, gender, sexual orientation, or
ethnicity) take on new significance in the light of the implied recognition that our culture
is not really the homogenous monolith (that is middle-class, male, heterosexual, white,
western) we might have assumed (2005: 12).

Pecola is a black girl who belongs to the lowest social class, which means she is a member of
the “ex-centric” (12). Morrison keeps contrasting white and black throughout the story,
while questioning white conventions. Right at the beginning and before every chapter, the
author draws the reader’s attention to the ideology of white society by reciting the narrative
of Dick and Jane. “Morrison both portrays the attractiveness of the Dick-and-Jane narrative
to the black community and deconstructs element by element the false ideology of this
white, middle-class discourse” (Feng 1998/99: 53). Klotman has a similar point of view and
states: “The ‘Dick and Jane’ referent effectively introduces the fictional milieu of Morrison’s characters; [...] It is the world of the first-grade basic reader-middle-class, secure, suburban and white, replete with dog, cat, non-working mother and leisure-time father” (1979: 123). It is this image constructed by the dominant white society which hence cannot be ignored by the minority group. They are indoctrinated to believe that whiteness guarantees a happy life and success whereas blackness signifies poverty and ugliness. But in order to understand the problem here the underlying concept of otherness needs to be explained. What exactly has happened that there is a differentiation between black and white people in the first place? Weedon mentions the following phenomenon that explains the construction of difference: “In their attempt to classify human beings by race and sex, the biological and ethnological sciences claimed to be identifying difference where they were in fact constructing it” (1997: 43). This theory is applicable to every aspect of life, not only race and sex. Beauty and ugliness are two further concepts that display difference, but only by identifying them do they become real, which is what white society has accomplished in The Bluest Eye. Once the differences are identified they force the various groups to draw boundaries. Everything that is different is also frightening, but by defining the ones who are similar to oneself the members of the group establish a feeling of safety. Interestingly, the black society in Toni Morrison’s novel creates boundaries by internalizing the beauty standards of white society that actually emphasize their difference, but it is this difference – the inability to be white –, that they all have in common and that forms the basis for familiar surroundings.

Claudia, the 9-year-old African-American narrator of the story, explicitly explains the problematic situation through the eyes of a child:

Adults, older girls, shops, magazines, newspapers, window signs – all the world had agreed that a blue-eyed, yellow-haired, pink-skinned doll was what every girl child treasured. [...] I destroyed white baby dolls. But the dismembering of dolls was not the true horror. The truly horrifying thing was the transference of the same impulse to little white girls. [...] What made people look at them and say, ‘Awwwww’, but not for me? (18-20)

Children are not able to understand the social dynamics that happen around them. The idea of one person being more “valuable” or “loveable” seems too abstract for them. Hence, it is no surprise that Claudia develops an urge to destroy the dolls that stand for everything she despises. As can be seen, it is not just Claudia or Pecola who are to a great extent influenced by these idealized beauty standards of a white girl with blond hair and blue eyes. Those girls seemed to be treated better, loved more and preferred in every possible way, in every situation and by every person. Kotman summarizes this experience as follows:
The epitome of the good, the true, and the beautiful is, of course, Shirley Temple. Morrison uses the contrast between Shirley Temple and Pecola, like the contrasting versions of “Dick and Jane,” to underscore the irony of black experience. Whether one learns acceptability from the formal educational experience or from cultural symbols, the effect is the same: self-hatred. (1979: 124).

The black community is swamped with images of white ideology, which makes it difficult to develop a healthy understanding for oneself and one’s cultural background. As Chris Weedon puts it, “even among Black people there are hierarchies of beauty based on white norms” (1997: 39). Needless to say, women of color will never be able to adjust themselves to aesthetic norms set by white society and they are not meant to be, which also displays the power relation between the two worlds. It is to a great extent through media that the perception of the self changes:

Images play a crucial role in defining and controlling the political and social power to which both individuals and marginalized groups have access. The deeply ideological nature of imagery determines not only how other people think about us but how we think about ourselves (Parmar 1990:116).

In *The Bluest Eye* the black women perceive themselves as inferior and simultaneously sense that there is no solution to live up to white beauty standards: “No efforts at disguise will make them into the images they learn to admire. Defined as the Other, made to be looked at, they can never satisfy the gaze of society” (Davis 1982: 329). According to Davis, being a woman doubles the complication: “Womanhood, like blackness, is Other in this society, and the dilemma of woman in a patriarchal society is parallel to that of blacks in a racist one: they are made to feel most real when seen” (1982: 329). For black women, there are not many other options left but to hate oneself. It seems bizarre, but self-hatred is the only aspect the women can control. Apart from that, they feel quite powerless against the indoctrination by white society. Kuenz states that “interaction with mass culture for anyone not represented therein, and especially for African-Americans, frequently requires abdication of self or the ability to see oneself in the body of another” (1993: 422). It proves to be of great difficulty to show strength, to stand above social conventions and to accept oneself even though society tells you the opposite. The lives of black people in *The Bluest Eye* would have been easier if they were given an opportunity to develop a collective ethnic consciousness that would celebrate their differences.

A whole group of people have been denied the right to create a recognizable public self – as individuals or as community. Given that combination of personal and communal vulnerability, it is hardly surprising that many characters choose the way of the least agony and the fewest surprises: they “choose” their status as objects, even fiercely defend it. Helene and Geraldine increasingly become perfect images rather than free selves. In
this retreat from life they are abetted by a community so dominated by white society as the Third that order and stability are its primary values. (Davis 1982: 327).

With no collective pride or willpower among the black community to withstand white society, they are easy targets or at least easily manipulated, which is the case with Geraldine. She lives in her own perfect world and is convinced that she belongs to the richer, better and more beautiful group of people in society who look down on girls such as Pecola. Geraldine is a brown-skinned woman, which allows her to differentiate between her and the ‘really black’ people. She orientates herself towards white beauty standards. Even when she is sleeping with her husband she is more worried about her appearance than her lack of affection: “She stiffens when she feels one of her paper curlers coming undone from the activity of love [...] She hopes he will not sweat – the damp may get into her hair” (82). As can be seen Geraldine’s obsession with beauty and looks greatly affects the marital interactions. Kuenz explains that, “Geraldine’s concern is focused on her hair, that part of her appearance which, along with her fair skin, she can control and adapt most easily to standards of white beauty” (1993: 427). Being able to adapt to beauty norms gives her power to some extent as opposed to the other female characters in the book who do not have the money or the lighter skin. She even teaches her son, Junior, that there is a difference between colored people and niggers. “Colored people were neat and quiet; niggers were dirty and loud” (85). She is a victim of beauty standards that she believes she can live up to. As a result, she cannot hide her distaste when Pecola is in her house. Even though they are both “black”, Geraldine clearly draws a line between herself and little Pecola. Her torn, dirty clothes and her chaotic hair are proof enough for Geraldine that this girl is below her. Instead of helping Pecola who is more like her than any white person could ever be, she is disgusted by her appearance and everything she symbolizes. It is this moment that makes Pecola become more aware than ever that even black people, her own kind, despise her. However, she does not see the connection between Geraldine and her desire to belong to the white society and the resulting rejection of her own culture. All Pecola sees is a beautiful black woman in an impressive house, who looks at her with disgust. “Pecola’s humiliation in Geraldine’s house provides the reader a glimpse of the derogatory side of Afro-American culture in the name of ‘uplifting a race’” (Feng 1998/99: 65).

Pecola never doubts the truth of the beauty standards of white society and perceives herself as ugly. It may be important to mention here, that her whole family is considered
ugly by the community. In the text, the source of their ugliness is said to be their own conviction (cf. 37). One revealing passage about the Breedloves in the novel is the following: “The master had said, ‘You are ugly people.’ They had looked about themselves and saw nothing to contradict the statement; saw, in fact, support for it leaning at them from every billboard, every movie, every glance” (37). The master that is mentioned here symbolizes white society and its absolute power to construct conventions and norms by which everyone has to abide. The Breedloves seem to accept it and would not say otherwise. For them the media represents the truth, which means there is no reason to fight it. The one, however, who has to suffer the most is Pecola, who grows up in an environment where the appearance of someone and not the character accounts for beauty: “Long hours she sat looking in the mirror, trying to discover the secret of the ugliness, the ugliness that made her ignored or despised at school, by teachers and classmates alike. She was the only member of her class who sat alone at a double desk” (43). Pecola is isolated and ignored and associates the behavior of others with her physical appearance. She is convinced that her ugliness deprives her from any positive social interaction with others. The extent of her obsession becomes apparent when she visits the McTeers and drinks a lot of milk: “We knew she was fond of the Shirley Temple cup and took every opportunity to drink milk out of it just to handle and see sweet Shirley’s face” (21).

Still adolescent, Pecola is not given any chance to find out who she is but instead is shown that beauty is associated with love. She is not the only one who falls for this illusion, but others learn along the story that there is another truth to it. As Davis explains, “The child Claudia learns false ‘love’ rather than cut herself off from the only model of lovableness she is offered. But Claudia the adult narrator sees that Shirley Temple cannot really be loved or imitated because she is just a doll, an image without a self behind it” (1982: 328), which basically can be seen as a metaphor for the whole society. The society portrayed in the novel is a superficial one, where individuals are forced to live up to certain expectations. Davis continues as follows:

“The crime of the racist society is not only the theft of black reality; it is the substitution of dead, external classifications for free self-definition. A society based entirely on the Look, on the absolute reification of the Other, reifies itself. If blacks are defined as slaves, whites are defined as masters; the Third is not a person at all, only an abstraction. There is finally a Look with no one behind it, because the freedom to define the self is denied. The movie stars and pinup girls of the white culture are not models of selfhood. The message they carry is that human life is being and appearance, not choice. To model oneself on them is to lose one’s responsibility to create oneself in a world of others; to “love” them is to deny the equal freedom of others (1982: 328)
The black community cannot develop their African American self, because they cannot see themselves with their own eyes. All they see is what white society sees. By doing this they are giving up their freedom to create themselves. Even though it is an unrealistic image that is conveyed by the media Pecola is strongly affected by it. “The novels are full of characters who try to live up to an external image [...] This conformity is not just a disguise, but an attempt to gain power and control. There is always the hope that if one fits the prescribed pattern, one will be seen as human” (Davis 1982: 325). However, their wish to “become white” and the power of white society degrade them to objects. Moreover, the struggle to gain power and to understand one’s identity is based on historic developments as well. Patrice Cormier-Hamilton points out an interesting aspect in Toni Morrison’s novels concerning this problem:

[... the struggle to realize one’s identity has surfaced repeatedly in literature; however, Morrison’s steadfast concentration on the importance of the past indicates that for her, self-realization for African Americans can only be achieved through an active acknowledgement of one’s cultural past. Only by understanding and accepting the past can African Americans achieve a psychological wholeness in the present and strengthen their power as a race in the future (1994: 111).

The past of the black community always plays an important role. The power struggle between the two ethnic groups can be traced back to the time of slavery. This topic is only implied insofar as the power struggle is still apparent, however, now it happens under the premise of appearance and beauty. There may be still a feeling of impuissance when black people face the white society, which may be the reason for their passiveness.

As I have argued, one great problem is that Pecola idealizes the aforementioned white women and girls and consequently associates their beauty with being loved by others. Kuenz defines the problem as follows: “romantic love and physical beauty, each defined according to what they exclude and each destructive to the extent that they are made definitionally unavailable” (1993: 424). Basically, beauty is the power that Pecola so desperately needs to define herself and it is that what she is being denied. All the characters in the book are affected by it and the consequences have already been mentioned by Davis, namely that the focus on appearance and looks deprives the black community of their self-definition. hooks, on the other hand, criticizes that without critical thinking black people are not able to “imagine, describe, and invent ourselves in ways that are liberatory. Without this, how can we challenge and invite non-black allies and friends to dare to look at us differently, to dare to break their colonizing gaze?” (1992: 2). Pecola never learns to
question norms and values set by society since her social environment does not either. In Pecola’s case this means she cannot develop her personality to its full potential. She is stuck in a circle that revolves around beauty and love, both of which are denied to her. The ability to define who you are is already a difficult task, but for Pecola it appears to be an impossible one. In her eyes her African American heritage is a burden that increases her ugliness. Instead of cherishing her culture she is forced by her social environment to reject it, even though it is part of her identity.

Ironically, her blackness does not only account for her “ugliness” but in some circumstances also for her invisibility. Morrison seems to play with the concept of being seen and not being seen at the same time. The idealized beauty standards and their disastrous result have been thoroughly discussed. The next important theme will be the notion of invisibility:

The theme of ‘invisibility’ is, of course, a common one in black American literature, but Morrison avoids the picture of the black person ‘invisible’ in white life (Ellison’s Invisible Man trying to confront passersby). Instead, she immerses the reader in the black community; the white society’s ignorance of that concrete, vivid, and diverse world is thus even more striking (Davis 1982: 323).

Morrison describes a scene in the novel that reveals the extent of the white people’s ignorance. Pecola enters Mr. Yacobowski’s shop to buy three Mary Janes: “He does not see her, because for him there is nothing to see. How can a fifty-two-year-old white immigrant storekeeper, [...] his sensibilities blunted by a permanent awareness of loss, see a little black girl?” (46). It is this indifference displayed by the shop keeper that hurts Pecola just as much as the fact that people call her ugly. For Walther it is obvious that “because Pecola does not fit the white standards of the specular system, people such as Mr. Yacobowski absent her from existence” (1990: 777). On the one hand, white people ignore her because of the ethnic differences and on the other hand, it is Pecola’s weak African American self that is to blame for the reaction of others, which is what Feng points out: “Pecola’s invisibility is an evidence of her lack of self-image when facing the dominant white society” (1998/99: 64). She has not yet been able to create a self-image, because there are no role models that would show her how to embrace her ethnic differences, but many others who hate themselves and celebrate white beauty. In her mind Pecola reflects Mr. Yacobowski’s attitude towards her:

She looks up at him and sees the vacuum where curiosity ought to lodge. And something more. The total absence of human recognition – the glazed separateness. [...] Yet this vacuum is not new to her. It has an edge; somewhere in the bottom lid is the distaste. She
One could argue that being seen is a proof of being alive. If a person is not seen, how do they know they exist? Being denied their own existence could be compared to wandering around the world without a purpose. However, as Davis points out, that Black people are visible in certain circumstances, especially when white people gain some benefit from it (cf. 1982: 324). “Thus they are consistently reduced and reified, losing their independent reality” (Davis 1982: 324). Their whole perception conforms to the standards of the white society. There is hardly room for black people to develop their personality, let alone set their own standards, or as hooks points out:

And it struck me that for black people, the pain of learning that we cannot control our images, how we see ourselves (if our vision is not decolonized), or how we are seen is so intense that it rends us. It rips and tears at the seams of our efforts to construct self and identity. Often it leaves us ravaged by repressed rage, feeling weary, dispirited, and sometimes just plain old brokenhearted. These are the gaps in our psyche that are the spaces where mindless complicity, self-destructive rage, hatred, and paralyzing despair enter (1992: 4).

I have already mentioned Geraldine who lives a life without passion or Claudia who shows her anger by dismembering white dolls. And there is Pauline who restricts herself to be a mother in a white household, but not at home. This destructive force that has been established by white society deprives all the characters of finding their own identity. However, the one who is damaged the most by white norms is Pecola. She discovers that people not only consider her ugly, but they are deliberately ignoring her and even think she is disgusting. Both situation – being seen and not being seen – make her realize that it is her African American heritage that is rejected. Part of her identity is classified as inferior, unworthy or even repugnant by society. Instead of being proud of her African American self, she learns to hate it just as the people around her have taught her. “It is only as we collectively change the way we look at ourselves and the world that we can change how we are seen” (hooks 1992: 6). However, the community in Morrison’s story does not attempt to change their perception. As I have demonstrated, white beauty standards deprive the black community to build up collective strength that would allow the development of a black identity within a white society. The characters are stuck in a world ruled by white beliefs and dismiss their own cultural heritage, which is the trigger of Pecola’s inevitable descent into madness. But first, let me introduce another part of Pecola’s identity: her passive self.
The Passive Self: Pecola’s Existence as a Reminder of Injustice

Pecola’s passiveness is a constant reminder of the injustice the African American community has to endure and the resulting helplessness. “Pecola is the epitome of the victim in a world that reduces persons to objects and then makes them feel inferior as objects. In this world, light-skinned women can feel superior to dark ones, married women to whores, and on and on” (Davis 1982: 330). The main protagonist never fights back or even questions the injustice that she has to encounter. When Maureen Peal, a “cute” white girl, starts an argument, Claudia and Frieda fight back, but Pecola, who was the actual object of Maureen’s insult, does not lift a finger. Claudia cannot even look at her: “Her pain antagonized me. I wanted to open her up, crisp her edges, ram a stick down that hunched and curving spine, force her to stand erect and spit the misery out on the streets” (71-72). The reason for Claudia’s anger is not Pecola’s behavior, but what she represents, namely the black community that is oppressed by the white society and their inability to defend themselves. Pecola does not display the slightest urge to fight back. She accepts the situation and seems to believe that the little white girl has every right on her side since this appears to be the natural law of white supremacy. Throughout the story the characters are more willing to accept white norms than to question them. Pecola mirrors the passiveness of all of them combined and hence becomes the ultimate victim. One of the reasons for her passiveness is the lack of assistance from her family, on which I will focus now.

Pecola is physically and mentally abused by her family, who should have supported and nurtured her. Parents are the first attachment figures a child knows and is dependent on. Any abuse has a traumatic effect on the child’s psychological development. (cf. Kagan 1999: 164). In Pecola’s case both parents contributed to her mental breakdown in the end. First of all, domestic violence happens on a regular basis. Pecola’s way of dealing with the situation and the antagonizing fight within herself when her parents are physically hurting each other is described in the following scene:

Pecola, on the other hand, restricted by youth and sex, experimented with methods of endurance. Though the methods varied, the pain was as consistent as it was deep. She struggled between an overwhelming desire that one would kill the other, and a profound wish that she herself could die (41).

Pecola’s home is not a place where she could feel safe. On the contrary, it’s a place where she lives in constant fear that one of her parents might eventually kill the other. She even thinks of death in the one place that is supposed to be a shelter for her. Feng summarizes
the parents’ influence on Pecola as follows: “Coming right before the end of the novel, Pauline’s and Cholly’s narratives serve as a discursive return of the repressed past to show how the parent’s traumatic experiences with a racist society are visited upon the children” (Feng 1998/99: 58). I will now discuss in what disastrous ways Pauline and Cholly affect their daughter’s life.

Pauline, Pecola’s mother, is among others responsible for the psychological damage of her daughter. The most dominant characteristic feature of Pauline is her obsession with looks. She is fascinated by the image of beauty conveyed in the movies, which hooks describes as follows:

When most black people in the United States first had the opportunity to look at film and television, they did so fully aware that mass media was a system of knowledge and power reproducing and maintaining white society. To stare at television, or mainstream movies, to engage its images, was to engage its negation of black representation (hooks 1992: 117).

Pauline willingly accepts black negation, engages it, as hooks states. She then continues: “To experience pleasure, Miss Pauline sitting in the dark must imagine herself transformed, turned into the white woman portrayed on the screen” (1992: 121). She does not feel the slightest urge to reject white beauty standards, on the contrary, she accepts the situation and celebrates these norms. As Morrison points out in “What the black woman thinks about women’s lib”, the white female beauty separates the black women from reality (cf. 1971: 23). Pauline is one of these victims that Morrison talks about. The world of beauty is an illusion, but for Pecola’s mother it is all she believes in and everything that matters to her. Walther explains this phenomenon as follows: “This unreality often takes the form of bodily denial, in which a female character, in an attempt to create herself in the image of mainstream American beauty, denies or ignores the physical reality of her body” (1990: 784). It is therefore not surprising that Pauline sits in a movie theater, where she is covered in darkness and utterly detached from reality by watching a movie that shows her exactly what she wants to see. “Morrison rejects Pauline’s conformity to standards of female beauty because they are not constructed out of her physical reality” (Walther 1990: 779). Mrs. Breedlove willingly believes in the illusionary constructed world. In a way, Pauline herself has developed a passive self, because she does not question white beauty norms and merely adapts to them. Her passive self serves as a role model for Pecola who subconsciously attempts to adapt to her mother’s attitudes to bond with her. However, Pauline’s obsession with beauty has no limits. When she recollects the first time with Pecola she thinks: “A right
smart baby she was. [...] But I knowed she was ugly. Head full of pretty hair, but Lord she was ugly” (124). As Feng points out, “from her mother, Pecola learns to love and internalize white ideology. What characterizes Pauline Breedlove as a mother is her lack of maternal affection” (1998/99: 58). Pauline cannot love her children “and into her daughter she beat a fear of growing up, fear of other people, fear of life” (126). However, she finds a place where she can at least get the so needed order in her life: the Fisher’s house. There she assumes the role of a loving “mother” and caregiver, something her own children never experience. “After she works for a time for the Fishers, a white family, she begins to emulate them. Their values become hers and their lifestyle takes on more meaning than her own [...]. Polly even begins to see her own daughter through the acquired astigmatism of the Fishers’ world” (Klotman 1979: 124), which has a devastating effect on her identity: “By giving up her family and retreating into the private world of snow white beauty and order in the Fisher household, Pauline cuts the final link to her racial identity” (1998/99: 60). What happens to Pauline here is what hooks describes as “internalized racism”. First, white society constructs images of black people that are based on racism and then black people “see the world through the lens of white supremacy” (1992: 1). Pauline never develops a pride for her African American heritage, but instead cherishes the ideology of the very society that makes her feel guilty of herself. A very crucial scene in the novel that depicts the contradiction of the two worlds Pauline lives in is the one, where she soothes the little white girl who is crying: “‘Hush, baby, hush. Come here, Oh, Lord, look at your dress. Don’t cry no more. Polly will change it.’ [...] ‘Who were they, Polly?’ ‘Hush. Don’t worry none’” (107). The interaction between Pauline and the little girl is a devastating scene to watch for Pecola who does not even dare to address her mother with anything but Mrs. Breedlove. The fact that the little white girl calls her Polly shows a very strong bond of affection and Mrs. Breedlove does not seem to object at all, but rather encourages her to call her Polly. The way she deals with the crying girl and the way she talks to her shows that the feeling is mutual, which is confusing for Pecola who has never received any kind of love from her mother at all. And now her mother seems to care for a little white girl with “corn yellow” hair (106). However, mother and daughter both fall for an illusion again. The nickname “Polly” and the statement by Mr. Fisher (“I would rather sell her blueberry cobblers than real estate”, 125) do not imply equality between the Fishers and Pauline. “Finally, it is easier for Pauline to ignore the fact that both the name and the anecdotes are condescending and exemplative of her
subordinate, and ultimately outsider, status in the Fisher household than to do without the ‘power, praise, and luxury’ (101) she finds there” (Kuenz 1993: 425). Working at the Fisher’s house makes Pauline believe that she has power and that she is of great importance to the white family. However, it is not love that she is met with, but a feeling of superiority. This is the reason why the little girl is able to give this grown woman a nickname who outside the Fisher’s house would not allow anyone to call her that. Pecola is not aware of that and only sees the loving treatment the girl receives from her mother. It is not surprising then that Pecola has developed an obsession with beautiful white women or girls, which of course has a great influence on her identity. Usually, a well nurtured girl grows up to be a strong and independent woman with great self-esteem. Pecola, on the other hand, does not get any kind of affirmation from her mother. There is no love, no help, and no support. The protagonist lives in constant fear and her insecurity makes her the perfect victim for the manipulative games of the white society, which triggers the acquisition of her passive self. Pecola does not want to or does not know how fight back, because there is no one in her immediate social environment that would back her up or encourage her, least of all her mother. Pauline only supports the development of Pecola’s passive self, but not of her African American self.

Cholly’s sexual abuse of his own daughter and the subsequent pregnancy shows the tragic consequences of the illusion established by the white society. Even though the rape eventually destroys Pecola, “Cholly’s perverse love is in the end the only love she experiences. But it is not a love that nurtures growth. Even the child she bears him dies” (Klotman 1979: 125). The traumatic effect of the abuse is obvious: Pecola descends into madness. The motivation behind Cholly’s action can be found in an earlier encounter in the story: In the novel he is caught by two white men while he is having intercourse with a girl named Darlene. They force him to go on while they are watching (145). This scene influences Cholly’s understanding of the world and how it works. Feng points out that “Cholly has been educated by racism to assert his manhood on the defenseless” (1998/99: 60). Surprisingly, Cholly does not hate the men:

Sullen irritable, he cultivated his hatred for Darlene. Never did he once consider directing his hatred toward the hunters. [...] They were big, white, armed men. He was small, black helpless. [...] For now, he hated the one who had created the situation, the one who bore witness to his failure, his impotence. The one whom he had not been able to protect, to spare, to cover from the round moon glow of the flashlight (148-149).
The struggle within Cholly becomes obvious, so does his helplessness. “The desire to ‘protect’ her was the desire to create himself as her protector. All he can do to restore his selfhood is to deny hers further” (Davis 1982: 330). Cholly is forced to go through a process of emasculation and there are three people involved who see it happen. The most humiliating moment of this man takes place and there are witnesses. But as it is mentioned in the book, he cannot address his anger to the actual perpetrators. “In the recurring scene of black male resentment at black women’s submission to oppression [...] Morrison shows the displacement of male humiliation onto the only person left that a black man can “own” - the black woman” (Davis 1982: 330). Due to a lack of alternative options, these men consider women as a tool to gain back their power that was taken away by the white society in the first place. “For years in this country there was no one for black men to vent their rage on except black women. And for years black women accepted that rage – even regarded that acceptance as their unpleasant duty (Morrison 1971: 24). If there was a list of hierarchy with all the characters of the novel, the black woman would be at the bottom. At the top we would find the white man, followed by the white woman, while black people are positioned far beneath them. Still, the black woman represents even less than the black man and can thus be controlled by him. Again, the power of the gaze/look should not be underestimated. “The primary difference between the male and female gaze in The Bluest Eye lies in its connection to sexual desire. Women look at other women to determine social status and to make comparisons to themselves, which is an objectifying act; men look at women as sexual objects” (Walther 1990: 779). Black women do not only have to withstand the gaze of white women judging them on terms of beauty, but also the lustful look on the men’s faces. The importance of sexuality in this power struggle between men and women is explained by hooks: “A sexual defined masculine ideal rooted in physical domination and sexual possession of women could be accessible to all men. Hence, even unemployed black men could gain status, could be seen as the embodiment of masculinity, within a phallocentric framework” (hooks 1992: 94). Black men are forced to find a place in society where they are still able to act out power, to prove their masculinity. Unfortunately, they find it at the expense of black women. Pauline has to daily face her husband’s aggression and anger. She fights back, but her behavior seems to be more an act of defiance than the result of the wish to change something or to gain power. From Pauline’s point of view she can only lose and the only place she feels needed and appreciated is at the Fisher’s house. The lack of interest
in her family and the helplessness when she faces Cholly supports the development of Pecola’s passive self. The protagonist watches her mother and her weak attempts to confront Cholly and she takes one rule from it: Better let it be, it does not make a difference if you fight or not. Besides that, Pecola’s passive self is also influenced by the painful emasculation process that Cholly has to go through. Her father’s fight is as fruitless as Pauline’s. However, Pecola’s passiveness also has a reverse effect on Cholly. When her father sees her doing the dishes he notices her unhappiness, her hopelessness and her helplessness (cf. 159), which reminds him of the encounter with the white men and his own helplessness. A mixed feeling of anger and shame rushes through him. Additionally, he remembers the first time he meets Pauline, when they both are almost happy. The confusion of his feelings and memories leads him to rape his own daughter. The starting point of this downward spiral of destruction can be found within the white society. The constant struggle to be a man in a world where black men are deprived of any power leaves its marks on every soul. Feng, however, sees Cholly’s disastrous act as a consequence of his “rootlessness”. She argues that Cholly grows up without any parental guidance and constantly struggles with his work and Pauline, both of which cause his “inability to keep his family ‘indoors’” (cf. 1998/99: 62). In any case, it is Pecola who has to pay the price. Pecola’s reaction during the rape is also discussed by Feng who offers an interesting answer: “But Pecola’s ambiguous reaction speaks to her extreme hunger for love and again underscores the disruption of familial structure” (1998/99: 62). As has been said in the beginning of this chapter, Cholly’s sexual abuse is the only kind of love Pecola experiences throughout the story. However, this grotesque kind of love only accelerated Pecola’s descend into madness.

Another function Pecola’s passiveness fulfills is the possibility to openly compare oneself to the poorest and ugliest girl to feel better about oneself without shame or guilt. “All of our waste, which we dumped on her and which she absorbed. And all of our beauty which was hers first and which she gave to us. All of us – all who knew her – felt so wholesome after we cleaned ourselves on her” (203). Compared to Pecola everyone feels richer, smarter, more beautiful, etc. The whole community feels a great satisfaction when looking at little Pecola. She is at the bottom of everything and since there is no one else they can direct their anger and dissatisfaction to Pecola has to face their emotions and she does so all by herself. To accuse the weakest link of a chain is easier than to confront the whole society whose power is omnipresent and the questioning of it would only result in even
more pain and rejection. The fact that Pecola is still a child and does not have a functioning family who would support her does not hinder the community to release their tensions and frustration at the expense of Pecola. Inexperienced and lonely as she is she never tries to stop them. Her passive self does not offer a solution, but to accept the situation and to primarily blame her looks. I have shown in this chapter that it is the constant futile comparison to white images and the negligence of her parents as well as the black community in general – who are suppressed by white society themselves – that trigger the acquisition of Pecola’s passive self and make her the perfect victim. Pecola’s fate seems inevitable, but she finds a way to deal with it: She acquires what I call a dreaming self.

The Dreaming Self: Finding Home in Imagination

After all those years of hatred that is directed towards Pecola, she finds the solution: She wishes for blue eyes. Kuenz summarizes Pecola’s downfall as follows:

Her breakdown at the end of the novel is the last in a series of instances in which boundaries marking the space between inside and outside, self and other, sense and nonsense are broken, removed, or simply no longer perform their tasks. As the novel’s prefatory Dick-and-Jane story turns from order to chaos with the gradual removal of punctuation and spacing, so too does the erasure of Pecola’s body and sexuality lead to her madness and isolation (1993: 428).

As has been pointed out, Pecola has to face rejection on a daily basis because of her appearance and her social status. When she encounters difficulties in life she utters the wish to disappear. “Please, God, [...] Please make me disappear.’ She squeezed her eyes shut. Little parts of her body faded away. [...] Almost done, almost. Only her tight, tight eyes were left. They were always left” (43). Kuenz states that Pecola needs to see herself in a white body, but in order to do that she “must not see herself at all” (1993: 422). This requires a strong imagination that Pecola has already developed. However, she cannot make herself completely disappear. Why are the eyes left? One explanation is that she is forced to see what is happening around her. She is forced to see what a beautiful woman looks like. And she is forced to see herself in the mirror. She is forced to see the differences between her and the others. Walther, for example, interprets the scene as follows: “Pecola's eyes remain after the body has disappeared, not only because women's eyes often serve as an attribute of female beauty, but also because Morrison insists on the specular construction underlying society's definitions of beauty” (1990: 778). For Walther the eyes symbolize the gaze of others, which constructs beauty. It is this focus on her eyes that Pecola realizes that all she
needs to find happiness are two beautiful blue eyes. “It had occurred to Pecola some time ago that if her eyes [...] were different, that is to say, beautiful, she herself would be different. If she looked different, beautiful, maybe Cholly would be different, and Mrs. Breedlove too” (44). In Pecola’s mind her eyes make all the difference. Since she believes that a beautiful face is the reason why people love you, it only makes sense that she wishes for blue eyes. “But her hope for the miracle built upon a childish logic only leads to self-objectification” (Feng 1998/99: 64). When Pecola wishes for blue eyes, she becomes an object that is regarded as desirable and valuable, because it conforms to society’s norms, which her current state does not allow. This is the reason for her desperate wish to change. Morrison writes, “she would never know her beauty. She would see only what there was to see: the eyes of other people” (45). How she is seen by others is more important to her than the way she perceives herself, which proves to be a disastrous attitude in a world where the majority looks down on her.

Since Pecola feels so incredibly lonely she establishes a relationship with inanimate objects. These objects are considered worthless and useless exactly as Pecola is seen by the community. As a consequence she can relate to these objects emotionally. First, she admires the Dandelions and the sidewalk crack that are disliked by the others (45).

These and other inanimate objects she saw and experienced. They were real to her. She knew them. They were the codes and touchstones of the world, capable of translation and possession. She owned the crack that made her stumble; she owned the clumps of dandelions whose white heads, last fall, she had blown away; whose yellow heads, this fall, she peered into. And owning them made her part of the world, and the world part of her (45-46).

In her imagination she sees how beautiful the dandelions are in every season and she can almost hear the smooth sound the skates make when they glide over the old sidewalk with its cracks (45-46). The only time Pecola senses some kind of power is when she lets her thoughts drift to those unwanted things. They do not belong to anyone so in her mind she is the owner of the dandelions and the cracks. She possesses them, which gives her strength and a purpose in life for a very short time, but it is more she will ever get from any human being. However, her perception changes after the gruesome encounter with the shopkeeper. “Pecola becomes non-existent to the middle-aged white immigrant storekeeper. Sensing this personal threat, Pecola reacts to the white distaste by trashing the dandelions as ‘ugly’ and ‘weeds’, with which she just has had one of her rare moments of intimacy” (Feng 1998/99: 64-65). The only independent source of power she has is her
imagination, her creativity, but it is constantly restricted and controlled by the standards of white society. Before she talks to the shopkeeper she possesses some objects. After she leaves the shop she transfers the hatred, the disgust that she has to experience towards the dandelions. Even these unwanted inanimate objects are subjects to white supremacy. Also, the objects that mirror white beauty standards become more important to her than the dandelions and the crack, which is exactly the case when she eats the Mary Janes, whose wrapping displays a smiling white face, with blond hair and blue eyes. Instead of enjoying the taste of caramel and peanut butter she is only interested in the beautiful girl (cf. Feng 1998/99: 64-65). In the novel the scene is described as follows: “To eat the candy is somehow to eat the eyes, eat Mary Jane. Love Mary Jane. Be Mary Jane” (48). Feng sums it up perfectly: “This double reaction again reflects Pecola’s parental heritage – transferring anger to the defenseless and the internalization of white ideology” (Feng 1998/99: 64-65). However, there is slightly more to it than what has just been mentioned. It is again Pecola’s imagination that plays an important role in the aforementioned scene. She wishes to be able to change her appearance by eating Mary Janes. She is so fascinated by the image on the wrapping that for her it becomes a real possibility. While she is eating the Mary Janes she herself becomes this idealized image of a white girl. For a moment she feels the happiness, the love and the power that she believes comes with beauty because of her strong imagination.

Pecola never experiences a safe place that she could call home. In order to understand what home means for Pecola, it will be helpful to look at the definition given by bell hooks. She describes a “homeplace” as follows:

In our young minds houses belonged to women, were their special domain, not as property, but as places where all that truly mattered in life took place – the warmth and comfort of a shelter, the feeding our bodies, the nurturing of our souls. There we learned dignity, integrity of being; there we learned to have faith. The folks who made this life possible, who were our primary guides and teachers, were black women (1994: 448).

Additionally, according to hooks, black women do not only have to work in a white household all day long but are expected to find the strength to build a safe place at home where children are nurtured etc. after their hard day of work (cf. 1994: 449). hooks continues to elaborate on the concept of a “site of resistance”: a place created by black women “where people could affirm one another and by so doing heal many of the wounds inflicted by racist domination” (1994: 449). It was a place where black people could develop their African American identity (cf. 1994: 449). If Pecola had a “homeplace” such as the one
hooks describes she would have had the chance to accept her heritage. Claudia for example rebels against the injustice by dismembering the white dolls and she at least questions the conventions around her. Compared to Pecola, Claudia is strong-willed and stubborn. A reason for this apparent different perception of the self is given by Klotman:

Claudia is able to learn and mature because the McTeers have the inner strength to withstand the poverty and discrimination of a racist society and to provide an environment in which their children can grow. Pecola’s family, on the other hand, is without those resources. The Breedloves – in spite of the name – are unable to show Pecola the love that would mitigate her rejection by society (1979: 124).

Pecola cannot rely on any support from her family as Claudia and her sister can. Claudia’s father even beats Mr. Henry and shoots at him, because he has touched Frieda (cf. 98). However, Pecola never experiences anything like that. There is no warmth for her, no nurturing and definitely no resistance. On the contrary, Mrs. Breedlove idealizes the white society and never builds a place where their African American identity can flourish but rather where the American idea of beauty is cherished and worshipped. Pauline even loves the white world of order in the Fisher house and does not show any concern for the tidiness or warmth in her own home. Pauline’s behavior is the absolute opposite of the picture of the loving mother hooks paints in her article: “She made an effort to rejoice with us that her work was done, that she was home, making it seem as though there was nothing about the experience of working as a maid in a white household, in that space of Otherness, which stripped her of dignity and personal power” (1994: 452). Pauline resembles this description of a mother only when she is in the Fisher house. Hooks also mentions the power of storytelling within those homeplaces that strengthens the connections between the people (cf. 1994: 449). In a home where people can talk about topics that are otherwise forbidden security is given. In such a place there is no need to be afraid of consequences. Pecola, again, never experiences this feeling of interest in shared experiences. As a matter of fact, she herself is the protagonist of the stories told in the different households. She and her tragic life are the topics that are discussed in the community which probably help others to establish this secure atmosphere in their homes. However, there is no sympathy for Pecola, she is called “foolish”. One person mentions – within the secure walls of a home – that Pecola “carry some of the blame” (187). Only in a homeplace is it possible to utter such a statement without being ashamed. Pecola hardly talks – neither at home nor outside, which proves my point.
Virginia Woolf once wrote “a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction” (1981: 4). Women were a long time dependent on the mercy of their husbands or the male dominant society in general if they wanted to act out their creativity. If a woman possesses a room of her own and money to spend then it can be assumed that she has a home that she can call her own. In conclusion, being able to live out one’s creativity can be seen as the proof that the subject has finally arrived home. Pecola has neither money nor a room but that does not prevent her from being creative in her own naïve way. As we all know Pecola descends into madness at the end of the story and seems to talk to herself:

I’d just like to do something else besides watch you stare in that mirror.
You’re just jealous.
I am not.
You are. You wish you had them.
Ha. What would I look like with blue eyes?
Nothing much. (192)

The mirror is a common theme in *The Bluest Eye*: “That the novel is framed by scenes in which Pecola looks at her image in a mirror underlines the inherently specular construction of female beauty” (Walther 1990: 778). Throughout the story the protagonist is haunted by her own image. Looking in a mirror and seeing herself with blue eyes is a victory for her. She is convinced that the blue eyes are real. Her fascination with them turns into obsession and she cannot stop looking at them. With the help of her imagination and Soaphead’s promise she creates her own truth, her own world. In her mind she is now a beautiful girl who people stare at on the streets: “Everybody’s jealous. Every time I look at somebody, they look off” (193). She does not realize that people stare at her because of the fact that her father has raped her. However, it does not matter, because Pecola finally found a place where she has a friend and where she is beautiful. A place where she can feel safe, a place where her soul is nurtured just as hooks describes. And it is due to her imagination, her creativity, that she reaches that place that for her is the only home she has ever had. Her mind is her home where she is able to process some of the incidents such as the sexual abuse:

And you don’t have to be afraid of Cholly coming at you anymore.
No.
That was horrible, wasn’t it?
Yes.
The second time too?
Yes.
Really? The second time too?
Leave me alone! You better leave me alone. (199)
Even though it is agonizing for her she attempts to deal with it nevertheless. However, there are moments when she cannot go any further than to admit to herself how horrible it has been what Cholly has done to her. The person she talks to is part of her identity and triggers some strong emotions with the carefully chosen questions. Pecola is far from dealing with the traumatic event in a healing way, because she only has herself and her restricted knowledge of the world and human interactions. Her mother still does not feel the urge to help her as she tells her “friend”: “Mrs. Breedlove look drop-eyed at you? Yes. Now she does. Ever since I got my blue eyes, she look away from me all of the time. Do you suppose she’s jealous too?” (193). Still, Pecola cannot see that there is another reason for her mother’s reaction. Pecola’s sexual abuse by Cholly is exactly the untidiness that Pauline abhors. Her ugly daughter has been raped by her no-good-husband and has lost the child. Pauline’s idea of the romantic and the idealized beauty standards force her to reject her own daughter even more. In her mind, such an incident would have never happened in the orderly world of the Fishers. Even though Pecola is alone as she has always been, she has the strength to create her own imaginative world, which offers her the protection that she has never been able to experience so far.

One could argue that Pecola’s madness is an escape rather than a defeat. There might be the assumption that the white society finally wins and Pecola gives up, with the result that she has lost her mind. However, it should be mentioned that in her imagined world she is happier than she has ever been in the real world. Of course, even in her imagination the idealized white beauty standards are the reigning ones. Why else would she choose blue eyes? However, since she has now blue eyes she lives up to the expectations of beauty imposed by white society which she herself has always accepted and considered to be the truth. When Pecola finally sees herself with blue eyes she has lost all connection to her African American self. Due to the fact that she has never had the opportunity to develop her African American self it is no difficulty for her to just reject the existence of this part of herself without regret. The self that I call “dreaming self” takes on a strong position in Pecola’s life. The term suggests that she has not given up hope and that she is to achieve her dream through imagination. Basically, the dreaming self refers to her creative self, the self that is able to use imagination as she pleases and that rescues her when she is desperate and helpless. Because of her dreaming self she is able to build a safe cocoon around her that protects her, but also isolates her from reality.
Another interesting point mentioned by Feng is the following: “Her insanity reverses her previous invisibility and forces her presence on her community” (1998/99: 55). People cannot ignore her anymore. However, that does not keep them from seeing her as an object rather than a human being. As Claudia explains, “And I believe our sorrow was the more intense because nobody seemed to share it. They were disgusted, amused, shocked, outraged, or even excited by the story. [...] We looked for eyes creased with concern, but saw only veils” (188). Pecola is not invisible anymore, but still not loved either. However, the protagonist is only aware that people look at her and that she is finally seen. The rest is made up in her mind. It seems that her community once more takes on the standards of white society. The lack of sympathy for a poor black girl resembles the attitude of ignorant white people and not that of a black community. There is one more crucial scene which is told by Claudia that displays the moral standards of the portrayed black society: “I thought about the baby that everybody wanted dead, and saw it very clearly. It was in a dark, wet place, its head covered with great O’s of wool, the black face holding, like nickels, two clean black eyes [...]” (188). For Claudia it does not matter whether the baby’s father is Cholly or that Pecola is not old enough to take on that responsibility, because she does not understand yet. For her, the black baby symbolizes everything that she cherishes in her own culture. So she contemplates about the hatred for the unborn black baby and the love for the blond girls. In her mind it is another proof that white people are the superior ones and white children are of more value than black ones. Pecola’s dreaming self is also able to protect her from dealing with the loss of her unborn child. The thought of her dead baby never crosses her mind in the story. Her dreaming self decides to focus on the beauty of her blue eyes and attempts to not let any negative thoughts enter her peaceful mind. As I have shown in this chapter, imagination is a powerful source to deal with problems and to finally find happiness.

From Passiveness to Activeness

Pecola undergoes an interesting change of personality. There are three major factors that influence her identity. Firstly, there is the disruptive family structure, which prohibits any kind of love and nurturing, nor is there an opportunity for Pecola to develop her African American self. Secondly, she has experienced such hateful racial discriminations in the past even by her own folks that she denies her African American heritage completely. And finally,
she has learnt to adapt to American culture by obsessively absorbing the white ideology of beauty. As has been mentioned before, she remains in a passive position throughout the story. She simply does not fight back nor does she show any resistance against the hatred and indifference that is directed towards her. However, in the end she discovers the active part of her personality, a self that is ready to change the situation. It might seem silly to wish for blue eyes but for Pecola it is the first step towards something comparable to freedom and power, even love. She often uses her imagination to overcome obstacles, but the influence of white society always hovers above her.

The most important change in her personality is the transition from passiveness to activeness which simultaneously means that she moves from sanity towards madness. It can be assumed that all the aforementioned incidents in Pecola’s life have slowly changed her. Klotman correctly argues that “just as her father and mother ironically nurture death, so does the society contribute to Pecola’s psychic death” (Klotman 1979: 125). As a matter of fact, the one act that finally triggers her transformation is when she is raped by Cholly, her own father, and the resulting pregnancy. She loses the child, but it is not mentioned how she feels about this tragic fate. Instead, her obsession with beauty helps her to overcome the incident, even though this means she is driven to madness. This is the moment she acquires her dreaming self, the one part of her identity that establishes Pecola’s own reality. By doing that, she finally cuts the last cord that connects her to her African American heritage, which means that her African American self is basically non-existent at the end of the story. As Morrison mentions in the preface, she was repelled when she tried to picture her childhood friend with blue eyes, since she has just uttered her wish (cf. VIII). The person involved does not see the absurdity of this wish, neither does Pecola. Her dreaming self prevents her from understanding the truth. Nevertheless the protagonist thinks that this change of appearance can assure her the happiness and love she has always wanted, which it does to a certain extent. It might seem adventurous to claim that she finds happiness now that she has gone mad. However, her active self, or dreaming self, enables her to create a home of her own. This homeplace is her imagination, where she has a friend, a fictitious one, but nevertheless the only one she has ever had. When the story begins she is lonely, feels ugly and is ignored. After her transformation she has a friend, feels beautiful and is seen. So the question is if her madness cannot be seen as an acceptable solution for Pecola. Of course, Pecola’s insanity does not prevent racial discrimination from spreading nor is it helpful for the community to
fight against the injustice and stereotypes. However, for Pecola it seems to be a satisfying way of dealing with her problematic past and her unbearable present.

Morrison cunningly tells the story from different perspectives which enable us to understand the development of Pecola’s possible selves. The story is primarily told by Claudia, but there is also an omniscient narrator and Cholly’s perspective. The fact that Claudia tells the story strengthens the impression of Pecola’s passive self. It seems as if Pecola is not able to tell her own story. This narrative device has another effect when it comes to identity: “All characterization occurs through childlike recounting of events that are crucial to the children’s maturing but are hardly of world-shaking significance” (Wagner 1985: 193). In order to understand the development of a child, the story has to be told by a child. Claudia focuses on events that are important for her and Pecola and hence for the reader who is then able to comprehend Pecola’s transformational change. The different narrators also mirror the looks and gazes Pecola has to endure. The reader perceives her life through a lens, always slightly distorted. And as the narration is variable so is Pecola’s identity. The changing perspectives mirror the various possible selves within Pecola. Another indicator of the connection between narration and identity are the Dick-and-Jane captions before each chapter. As I have mentioned the concept of identity is a continuous process, it is not possible to set boundaries when it comes to possible selves. The sentences of the Dick-and-Jane narrative merge into a unit of letters, which can be seen as a metaphor for the complexity of one’s identity and the difficulties to split it into “categories”. Pecola’s African American self is linked to her passive self as well as her dreaming self. These parts of her identity cannot be seen as separated units but rather as components that are strongly influenced by and connected to each other. The telescoped lines could also stand for the fact that Pecola’s African American self is rolled over by the ideology of white society, which eventually crushes her.

**Conclusion of The Bluest Eye**

Morrison shifts the narrative perspective to a peripheral voice that otherwise would have never had the opportunity to tell its story. It is Pecola’s voice, but also Claudia’s that enter our mind. Morrison empowers two little black girls to tell the story from their point of view, which enables the reader to gain new perspectives on the topic of beauty, ethnicity and the resulting helplessness of someone who does not live up to expectations set by a white
society. This shift of perspective is distinctive in postmodernism: “The theory and practice of postmodern art has shown ways of making the different, the off-center, into the vehicle for aesthetic and even political consciousness-raising – perhaps the first and necessary step to any radical change” (Hutcheon 2005: 73). Morrison published the book in the 70’s, which is relevant to the message of the novel. As I have mentioned in the introduction, during that time women, especially women of color, still had to find a voice of their own. The majority of novels were written by white men, in spite of the feminist movements. Authors with an ethnic background – and here I also want to emphasize female authors – were still the minority. However, Morrison challenges this lopsided literary situation by the idea to let little black girls tell the story, which is an innovative approach to raise consciousness at that time. This powerful narrative device enables Morrison to portray a life through the eyes of the most innocent members of society: children, and in this case especially black girls who suffer tremendously when they start to define themselves in terms of beauty. The girls in the story question their identity, their life, because of beauty standards that they can never achieve.

Morrison explores the visual system upon which definitions of beauty are based, identifies the racial underpinnings of visual beauty, and reorients the gender-based construction of the gaze. Over this two-decade period in her oeuvre, Morrison has moved to redefine beauty out of the specular system and into a racial authenticity (Walther 1990: 775).

In *The Bluest Eye* visual beauty lies in white skin and blonde hair. For African American girls these standards trigger a self-hatred that deprives the girls of any opportunity to be happy. Their blackness appears to them as insuperable obstacle. Their desperate wish to be like white girls is actually what Morrison criticizes vehemently. Black girls and black women should not be blinded by disputable norms, but accept themselves in all their uniqueness. It is of great importance for autonomous subjects to question society and its conventions. Otherwise girls like Pecola do not find a place where they belong, because of their belief that the illusions are true. This is the reason, why she gives the girl a voice who is ostracized by this system. Wagner makes a very interesting observation:

Claudia and Frieda McTeer provide both the voice and the understanding consciousness for Pecola Breedlove’s story, a story that would have been vastly different if told by another kind of observer. The aptness of having the young black girl’s story told by her peers, other children for whom life – sexual, political, economic – is as much a mystery as it is for Pecola, becomes clear as Morrison closes the masterful “Autumn” with the sleepy dialogue between Pecola and Frieda, with Claudia listening in (1985: 192).
The fact that Claudia has the same limited knowledge of the world as Pecola and that she is
the main narrator enables the reader to gain access to the mind of an 11-year-old girl and to
understand Pecola’s story better (cf. Wagner 1985: 192). Additionally, the obvious contrast
between Pecola and Claudia in terms of family structures and self-perception helps the
reader to perceive Pecola Breedlove’s loneliness in a more dramatic way, which in turn
evokes strong emotions within the reader. This brings me to the next point: contrasts.

A reason for the strong emotional response is the fact that Morrison plays with
oppositions throughout the novel: black vs. white; brown eyes vs. blue eyes; ugly vs.
beautiful etc. She tells the story in absolutes, which enforces the perception of the narrow-
mindedness of the characters who are not able to see beyond that categorization. The
subjects fail to acknowledge that blackness does not imply ugliness, that beauty does not
guarantee happiness and that acceptance of a miserable situation does not cause any
change. Wagner mentions another valid point concerning oppositions in the Dick-and-Jane
narrative:

In some fantasy land, white children live happily with two parents, in a house, playing with
pets and friends. In the Breedlove world, where housing is macabre if it exists at all,
parents engage in physical battle, do intentional harm to their children, and abuse pets as
readily as they do children. The novel is built on these almost unspeakable contrasts, and
Morrison’s narrative strategy is to show the contrasts, but always ironically and nearly
always through the eyes of children (1985: 193).

These contrasts evoke stronger emotions within the reader. Absolutes have a provocative
tendency, since they impose only two options on the reader, which is very unsatisfying and
one of the reasons why the reader reacts strongly to the story. Wagner points out that the
contrasts between the Dick-and-Jane narrative and the Breedlove family are apparent in all
the chapters: In “Autumn” the house of Pecola’s family is described with the caption “Here is
the House”, in “Winter” there is the story of Geraldine and her cat which matches with the
line “See the cat” etc. (cf. Wagner 1985: 195). In the end, when Pecola imagines a friend and
wishes for blue eyes to be loved the reader is left “with an almost unbearable despair”
(1985: 195). Even though the story of Dick and Jane is used as reference for the perfect and
happy world, it is an illusion. Morrison shows how easily a group is tricked into accepting a
lie that makes their lives miserable. The contrast between the Dick and Jane story and
Pecola’s world is a constant reminder for the reader that illusions are powerful, especially
when they are based on oppositions.
Morrison frequently questions society’s dynamics in *The Bluest Eye*. The author manages to portray a society that follows the illusion that beauty leads to success and love. She accurately paints the picture of ignorant people who willingly believe the most outrageous lies about happiness and blame others for their failures, which eventually results in despair and denial, even surrender. There is a tendency in the book to create one’s own reality as it is the case with Geraldine, Pauline and Pecola. The life they are trapped in does not offer many opportunities but rather one cage after another based on beauty, social class or gender issues. It is this helplessness of the characters that capture the reader emotionally. *The Bluest Eye* helps the readers to broaden their horizon and to see the story from a different angle, namely that of a black girl. The author shows the devastating effect conventionalized norms can have on a minority group that is willing to sacrifice their weakest member to feel better about themselves. Morrison’s novel conveys the message that it is a fine line that could eventually mean one’s own happiness or the complete destruction of someone else’s. The characters in the book are not necessarily perpetrators in the sense that they deliberately destroy Pecola’s life. As I have shown in the case of Cholly Breedlove, the characters also have to be seen as victims of a society that strategically suppresses them by the permanent indoctrination of their values and standards and by its constant display of superiority. The transformation from victim to perpetrator happens quickly and once the circle closes there is hardly a chance to break free from it. Morrison seems to warn us to contemplate the whole situation before judging individuals for their actions. The second the readers develop an understanding for the perpetrators they are once again emotionally involved since they have realized that at one point they might be the ones who are judged. Furthermore, there is another group of people that is criticized by the author: “Yet Morrison condemns even the best of these families when it is unable to stand the test of genuine horror, Pecola’s pregnancy” (Wagner 1985: 194). The McTeers, for example, protect their daughters and care about others, but even this family fails to see Pecola as a victim.

The most effective characteristic feature of Pecola to evoke emotions is her innocence. Considering Pecola’s situation I can understand Morrison’s decision to let her descend into madness. As Tyson points out, the little black girl is the only character who does not inflict pain on others and remains innocent (cf. 2006: 183). It is this innocence of hers that does not allow any other solution, since she seems incapable of feeling anything
hostile against those who torment her. Consequently, her story becomes even more tragic as the reader has to witness the downfall of the weakest of the characters who is the last person to hurt someone. The injustice is difficult to bear and the reader becomes emotionally involved with the story. It seems as if Morrison wants to point out that an innocent girl is the perfect victim because she does not fight back, which simultaneously shows the manipulated community that do not see her as victim, but as perpetrator who deliberately chooses to not fit in. The power of ideological concepts should not be underestimated. As a result, Pecola transforms silently and unnoticed. Even in her madness she does not harm anybody, but people still perceive her as a nuisance. It is quite interesting to see that the characters do not want to understand that they contributed to the development of her mental state.

Furthermore, Morrison shows the fragility of the identity of a young African American girl, whose insecurity and self-doubt is shared by many more in this multicultural world of ours. Weedon points out that “even today, at the end of the twentieth century, racial and sexual stereotyping still shape the opportunities open to those who are not White, male and middle-class” (1997: 42). As it has become quite obvious in my analysis, every kind of oppression and racism directly influences the self-perception of the subject. As a matter of fact, Morrison implicitly points out that the ethnic self needs to be nurtured and cherished in order to avoid a tragedy similar to Pecola’s. Based on my findings, the subject is able to influence parts of her identity in order to survive in a world that does not acknowledge her existence or perceives it as mistake. In Pecola’s case, the development of a dreaming self offers her protection and the fulfillment of her dreams, namely the achievement of white beauty standards by having blue eyes. The dreaming self proves that change is possible and verifies the flexibility of one’s identity. However, it needs to be mentioned that Pecola’s change happens on a subconscious level. She hardly understands the dynamics around her nor does she question them. She is trapped in her own world not knowing what has happened to her. Nevertheless, she is happy.
The Woman Warrior: The Burden of Silence and the Power of Words

Maxine Hong Kingston tells us about her life in America and the effects the foreign culture has on her identity as a Chinese and as a woman, which can be seen in the composition of her possible selves. Kingston’s complex story offers an insight into the identity struggles of a young girl growing up. The protagonist has to face several obstacles based on her cultural background and her inability to express herself appropriately. As in The Bluest Eye the protagonist undergoes a significant change throughout the story: She turns from an oppressed, silent woman to a fighting woman warrior with a voice of her own. To understand this transformation it is of great importance to look at the possible selves that Maxine possesses or acquires. I will start to explain her ethnic self: Similar to Pecola’s African American self the Chinese self simply exists because of Maxine’s ethnic background. Maxine’s family has migrated from China to America, which implies that her family still has a strong link to their home country. The protagonist lacks this connection, but that does not rule out the fact that she possesses a Chinese self. On the contrary, she grows up in America with two competing selves: the Chinese and the American self, which both play a significant role of her understanding of the world. In what ways and why the dominance of one or the other alternates, will be discussed in this chapter. Maxine further develops a silent self, because her voice is not strong enough to express her feelings. I will explain whether it is a necessity, a coincidence or mere despair that she has acquired this self. Furthermore, in Kingston’s particular case the female self has to be analyzed thoroughly. The perception of gender roles alters her understanding of her female self. Whether she feels strong and independent as a woman or senses the superiority of men depends on her upbringing as well as her experiences as a woman. Finally, I will have a look at the creative self of Kingston, which is her solution against the ongoing injustice she experiences not only at home but also outside, at work or in school. I will start with a discussion concerning her Chinese self and her American self.
The Chinese Self vs. the American Self: Caught between two Worlds

Maxine Hong Kingston tells us about her Chinese childhood in America and the resulting complications. Juhasz observes that “born in the United States to Chinese immigrant parents, her search for self necessarily involves a definition of home. Is it America, China, or some place in between? For Kingston the question of national identity complicates the search for self” (1985: 174). As I have argued before and as Juhasz states, the sense of belonging is of great importance when it comes to defining identity. However, to answer Juhasz’ question a thorough analysis of Maxine’s situation is necessary. The obvious clash between ancient Chinese traditions and the modern world of America have a great influence on the protagonist’s understanding of her identity.

Those of us in the first American generation have had to figure out how the invisible world the emigrants built around our childhoods fits in solid America. [...] Chinese-Americans, when you try to understand what things in you are Chinese, how do you separate what is peculiar to childhood, to poverty, insanities, one family, your mother who marked your growing with stories, from what is Chinese? (5-6).

Since her family has lived in China and moves to America before she is born, Maxine gets to know two different worlds. Firstly, there is her family who stands for Chinese traditions and secondly, there is also America with its different values, customs and beliefs. Juhasz points out that “for Kingston, in fact, who has never been there, China is not so much a physical place as it is a construct used by her parents to define their own identities. America too, especially for her parents, is a psychological state as much as it is a place” (1985: 174). Her parents’ identity is based on their experiences and ways of living in China. They idealize their former life and want to pass on these memories and stories to their children in order to make sure their heritage lives on. The parents have difficulties in adapting to the new surroundings and cling to the familiar words and faces that remind them of their home country. However, Maxine cannot identify with China and finds herself lost, even confused. The constant struggle Maxine has to face is portrayed in numerous scenes throughout the story: “Walking erect (knees straight, toes pointed forward, not pigeon-toed, which is Chinese-feminine) and speaking in an inaudible voice, I have tried to turn myself American-feminine. Chinese communication was loud, public” (11). Maxine is embarrassed by the obvious difference in behavior. She feels the urge to adapt herself to American ways of living, which results in the suppression of her Chinese heritage. Similar to Pecola, Maxine is tempted to reject her ethnic self to survive in America. Since she cannot change her foreign
looks she focuses on manageable tasks such as conquering the American way of walking and talking in order to fit in.

The most obvious difference between Pecola and Maxine is the fact that Maxine still has a chance to accept her heritage, whereas the little black girl is not able to. There are numerous moments when Maxine rejects the Chinese traditions such as the unjust treatment of women or when her mother scares her with talk-stories\(^1\) and ghost stories that keep haunting her. However, there are also moments when she cherishes her Chinese self, which I will discuss later on in more detail. Even though Maxine keeps working on her personality and her speaking skills to finally fit in her Chinese heritage proves to be an insuperable obstacle:

My American life has been such a disappointment.  
"I got straight A’s, Mama.”  
“Let me tell you a true story about a girl who saved her village.”  
I could not figure out what was my village. And it was important that I do something big and fine, or else my parents would sell me when we made our way back to China (45-46).

What the American self of Kingston expects after she has got good grades is praise. Instead, she is told a story of a brave Chinese girl that according to her mother has really accomplished something great. Traditional Chinese men and women are modest and it is customary that they deny a compliment, for example (cf. 134). Even in this short passage it becomes obvious that her American self is proud and deems it right to be praised for the accomplishment. The Chinese self, however, suggests living humbly. Another example of cultural difference is a scene that takes place towards the end of the story: Brave Orchid explains why she calls her daughter ugly: “That’s what we’re supposed to say. That’s what Chinese say. We like to say the opposite” (203). Maxine takes these sayings literally, because she is not familiar with Chinese customs. The consequence of these cultural differences is the alternation of the dominating self. By adapting to American culture and lifestyle Kingston distances herself from her Chinese self. Whenever there is an important moment for her that marks a successful adaptation, it is not valued in the Chinese community. As she says in the paragraph above she is lost. She apparently does not belong to the Chinese community because she herself has never been in China and has only heard of traditions and stories – but has never experienced anything herself. At first glance it seems that there is no

\(^1\) In *The Woman Warrior* talk-stories refer to stories that are passed on orally from one generation to the next, in this case from mother to daughter. Similar concepts would be narrating or storytelling. These talk-stories offer an opportunity for the subject to approach their culture and their identity since the content deals with traditions, mythology and human nature.
opportunity for her to shape her ethnic identity, but as we will see later, this is far from true. At the beginning she does not feel at home in America either, because Chinese immigrants gather together and built an invisible wall around their community as has been mentioned above. Basically, Maxine has Chinese roots with which she does not feel familiar, but which simultaneously exacerbates the adaptation to the still foreign world of America. Even though Maxine is a child of the first generation American she sometimes perceives the American community differently:

But America has been full of machines and ghosts — Taxi Ghosts, Bus Ghosts, Police Ghosts, Fire Ghosts, Meter Reader Ghosts, Tree Trimming Ghosts, Five-and-dime Ghosts. Once upon a time the world was so thick with ghosts, I could hardly breathe; I could hardly walk, limping my way around the White Ghosts and their cars. There were Black Ghosts too, but they were open eyed and full of laughter, more distinct than White Ghosts. [...] It seemed as if Ghosts could not hear or see very well (96-98).

The comparison with ghosts leads to the assumption that Americans are shallow subjects, probably because of the stereotypes or racism they impose on immigrants as I will discuss later on in the chapter. However, it also shows the obvious boundary that is drawn by Kingston and her Chinese friends. For them, Americans represent a mystery with their very own traditions and their way of living. There seems to be no substance, no core within those bodies. Or as Feng points out, “Her American ghost world is a result of her parent’s refusal to acknowledge America” (1998/99: 125). The Chinese, on the other hand, are often not seen by the American “ghosts” which already gives a hint to the perceived racial understanding in the US. Since the white workers do not react when they come to the houses of the Chinese families the children sense that the Americans are in a superior position. Something that cannot be grabbed or understood can only be a ghost. Maxine, again, may not be aware of it at first, but she is deeply involved with the Chinese traditions since she grows up in a place where those values are nurtured. As a consequence, she and the others also have internalized stereotypes of Americans as well as African-Americans due to their obvious difference. The connection to her Chinese heritage is perfectly shown by the simple use of the word “ghost”, a term used by her parents to emphasize their differences. However, the struggle between her American and Chinese self continues. The critical situation is well displayed in the following passage: “They would not tell us children because we had been born among ghosts, and were ourselves ghost-like. They called us kind of ghost. Ghosts are noisy and full of air; they talk during meals. They talk about anything” (183-184). The parents are aware that their children have adapted to American culture and so is Maxine. Her ghost-
like existence makes it hard for her to find the right place, to know where she belongs to. As her mother says, she is a “kind of ghost”, implying that her American self has influenced her Chinese self.

Unlike Pecola, Maxine cannot escape from her cultural background, because she grows up in a place where the Chinese self is not denied, but nurtured. Of course, Maxine struggles with this part of her identity, but her way of dealing with it differs significantly from Pecola’s. The African American girl does not have the opportunity to get to know her culture or to feel pride concerning her difference. Maxine, on the other hand, does, which depends on their family structures. Pecola’s mother lives for the beauty standards of the white society, whereas Brave Orchid, Maxine’s mother, mainly rejects the American way of life and cherishes her own cultural background. The love or hatred concerning the own ethnic self is inherited by the family, which does not rule out the fact that the subject cannot question certain aspects of it, as it is the case with Maxine. As a matter of fact, it is because of her mother, Brave Orchid, that she develops an understanding for her cultural heritage, of which she is not aware at first. Her mother makes use of a method which slowly brings Maxine closer to her culture on a subconscious level: the talk-stories.

Even though Maxine is haunted by the talk-stories of her mother at first, they do bring an indisputable advantage: They further the development of Maxine’s Chinese self. Feng concludes that “storytelling [...] serves simultaneously as the link between storytellers and their communities and a way to maintain individual talents” (1998/99: 111). Talk-stories are ways to bond with other Chinese who have also grown up listening to their parents and eventually become part of that oral tradition themselves. It seems that the continuation of talk-stories is connected to some sort of national pride, which is why, even though Maxine is missing that link to China, she describes her experience with her mother’s talk-stories as follows: “Night after night my mother would talk-story until we fell asleep. I couldn’t tell where the stories left off and the dreams began, her voice the voice of the heroines in my sleep. [...] At last I saw that I too had been in the presence of a great power, my mother talking-story” (19-20). Maxine feels the power of her mother’s talk-story and by retelling her mother’s story she herself becomes a story-teller: “Kingston’s talking story, based on her mother’s stories, releases the same kind of transformative energy and a sense of continuity. Storytelling is the major force behind the narrator’s retrieval of mother/daughter interconnectedness in *The Woman Warrior*” (Feng 1998/99: 111). The bonding between
Maxine and her mother with the help of storytelling also supports the development of her Chinese self. Brave Orchid stands for Chinese traditions and now that Maxine follows in her mother’s footsteps, she is approaching her cultural heritage. By writing about her mother’s talk-stories the story lives on and Kingston preserves Chinese legends, myths and customs just as her mother does:

In *The Woman Warrior*, the mother is the center and the driving force behind the narrator’s storytelling. [...] Talking story is the mother’s strategy of education. [...] The mother educates her children with her stories and passes on consolidated ancient wisdom. [...] By talking story, the mother extends and continues Chinese traditions into the lives of her American children (Feng 1998/99: 111-112).

As a consequence, her Chinese self is strengthened because of the talk-stories: They form the basis for the knowledge of Chinese mythology, an important aspect of Chinese culture. By telling stories herself, Kingston has already internalized one characteristic of a traditional Chinese woman. Her Chinese self develops unconsciously by listening to the talk-stories of her mother. Even though Kingston lives in America, she cannot distance herself from this Chinese self, which is due to her mother’s talk-stories. By including them to ancient Chinese wisdom her mother knowingly supports the development of her children’s Chinese identity. Maxine does not grow up listening to American bedtime stories which might have changed her personality significantly, but gets to know her home country which she herself has never visited. However, Maxine also finds out about the different Chinese perception of gender issues: “But the mother’s talking story is double-edged: if it is educational, it also reiterates patriarchal and misogynist messages of traditional Chinese culture. [...] In confusion and ambiguity, her children need to interpret the stories themselves” (Feng 1998/99: 112). This explains why Kingston sometimes becomes upset with her mother’s talk-stories, because they offer no straightforward explanation of the mentioned incidents. The consequences of those stories are described in the following passage, when her mother tells her about a baby that was born without an anus and that is left in the outhouse to die:

As a child, I pictured a naked child sitting on a modern toilet desperately trying to perform until it died of congestion. I had to flick on the bathroom lights fast so that no small shadow would take a baby shape, sometimes seated on the edge of the bathtub, its hopes for a bowel movement so exaggerated. When I woke I sometimes heard an infant’s grunting and weeping coming from the bathroom. I did not go to its rescue and waited for it to stop (86).

Her mother tells her children about the mysterious forms of life, but for Maxine it equals a horror story that keeps her awake at night. As a result, the protagonist sometimes associates the scary stories with China itself and slightly distances herself from her cultural heritage.
Her first sentence of the paragraph above is quite interesting: She takes a Chinese story and puts it into an American frame, hence the modern toilet. Even as a child Kingston is aware of her double identity. It is only natural for her, that she combines Chinese tradition with the modern American way of life. A revealing passage of this duplicity in life perception is the following:

To make my waking life American-normal, I turn on the lights before anything untoward makes an appearance. I push the deformed into my dreams, which are in Chinese, the language of impossible stories. Before we can leave our parents, they stuff our heads like the suitcases which they jam-pack with homemade underwear (87).

As Maxine describes it herself, the American and the Chinese self clash: In her early childhood she associates China with myths and foreign traditions, both of which confuse her to a great extent. Even later on, China is a symbol for everything unusual and foreign. Her American self, on the other hand, wants her to live a “normal” life, one without deformed people or aunts that are deliberately forgotten, which leads to the conclusion that everything connected to Chinese is abnormal. She deals with her Chinese self in a more cautious way, but that does not imply that this part of her identity is less important than the American one. It can be argued that the influence of her Chinese self is even greater due to the cultural background of her family and the way she is raised. However, this seems to be a lopsided approach, because the life she leads outside her home is primarily the life of an American. The preference to either one or the other depends on the different situations or circumstances. However, when she is older there seems to be a slight shift towards the American self. When Maxine visits her mother’s house again later on she already has white hair, but the stories still haunt her. This is why she reacts upset when her mother starts to talk about ghosts again: “I don’t want to hear Wino Ghosts and Hobo Ghosts. I’ve found some places in this country that are ghost-free. And I think I belong there, where I don’t catch colds or use my hospitalization insurance. Here I’m sick so often, I can barely work. I can’t help it, Mama” (108). Maxine realizes that she can escape from Chinese traditions and myths when she is away from her mother’s house and lives her own life. It seems that at that moment she feels more connected to her American self. However, there is always a constant struggle between her American and her Chinese self for which she finds a solution at the end. In this chapter I have demonstrated that the clash between her American and her Chinese self significantly influence her life and self-perception. Another part of her identity that I want to focus on now is her female self.
The development of Maxine’s female self proves to be a slow process. One reason for this is her Chinese heritage, which significantly undermines her female self. Traditional Chinese gender roles put women in an inferior position. The emigrant villagers, but also Maxine’s family, usually utter Chinese sayings such as the following: “Feeding girls is feeding cowbirds. [...] There’s no profit in raising girls. Better to raise geese than girls” (46). China’s narrow understanding of the female self makes it difficult to take a stand as a woman, to be independent. Maxine has to fight harder than other women, because her ethnic self is constantly reminding her that she is not worth as much as a man. This is why her female self grows gradually stronger as the story goes along. American girls and women also have to face discrimination, but they have not been indoctrinated that they are worthless since their childhood. This in turn, complicates the situation for Chinese girls, when they sense the confidence and inner strength of American girls. They are immediately intimidated and doubt the success of their undertaking. Apart from that, the family dynamics do not allow gender equality. When Maxine’s uncle goes shopping he does not want to take girls with him: “When he heard the girls’ voices, he turned on us and roared, ‘No girls!’ and left my sister and me hanging our coats back, not looking at one another. The boys came back with candy and new toys” (47). The different treatment between boys and girls is obvious and as a consequence Maxine rebels against the injustice. “I stopped getting straight A’s. [...] I refused to cook. When I had to wash dishes, I would crack one or two. ‘Bad girl,’ my mother yelled, and sometimes that made me gloat rather than cry. Isn’t a bad girl almost a boy?” (47). Her wish to become a boy is a “rebellion against her mother and her harping on the uselessness of girls, especially bad ones. It is a way for Maxine to deny her connection with what is devalued in her society” (Ho 1999: 135). However, there is another problem that conflicts with her rebellious manner: “And all the time I was having to turn myself American-feminine, or no dates” (47). Her female self is constantly struggling to grow stronger and to achieve independence. On the other hand, there is this desire to be with men, which of course does not need to contradict with one’s independence. However, she is forced to change her behavior because her Chinese self interprets femininity differently than her American self. It does not come naturally to her to act American-feminine, which implies that dates are associated with great effort on her part. As has been mentioned before, her
mother’s talk-stories influence her life. At the beginning we learn from Maxine’s aunt whose name is not allowed to be mentioned in her family’s house. The aunt kills herself and her baby after villagers raid the house. Maxine concludes: “Carrying the baby to the well shows loving. Otherwise abandon it. Turn its face into the mud. Mothers who love their children take them along. It was probably a girl; there is some hope of forgiveness for boys” (15). Maxine is convinced that in China girls are worthless compared to boys. The stories her mother tells her seem to contribute to the negative image about China she has made up in her mind. Ho sums up the situation of Maxine and others perfectly:

The mothers and daughters in Kingston, Tan, and Ng tell stories of betrayal and complicity within oppressive systems, not just about satisfactions, resistance, and empowerment. They portray the cruelties that women (and men) can inflict on each other and their families; they tell the stories of the social, economic, and historical deformation and exhaustion of women, men, their families, and ethnic communities. They represent the complicated struggles women confront in naming desire, self, and community in ways that better approximate their embodied understanding of experience (1999: 22).

Maxine associates her Chinese self with traditional gender roles, in which the women are inferior to men. Therefore, her female self rebels against the Chinese self and is able to identify more with her American self. However, Ho points out the following interesting aspect: “She is doubly silenced by ‘Chinese-feminine’ and ‘American-feminine’ models of behavior for young girls. She is considered retarded by some of her teachers, handicapped and silenced in her second-language English” (1999: 132). The silence she has to go through is partly based on the perception of femininity in the Chinese culture as well as the American one. The female self is among others concerned with the realization of femininity and since Maxine grows up in-between two ethnic worlds she has the opportunity to experience both the Chinese and the American understanding of femininity. While this can be a chance to enhance one’s understanding of culture, it can also be a burden as it is the case with Maxine. She is aware of the differences and attempts to change herself. Her female self favors the American idea of femininity, but Kingston has internalized the Chinese one as well and struggles to find an acceptable solution.

Another reason for Kingston’s female self to fight the Chinese self is the native language, which mirrors female inferiority to men. Hutcheon explains the focus on language and gender as follows:

In postmodern fiction, self-reflexivity cannot be separated from the notion of difference. In her fiction/autobiography/biography, The Woman Warrior Maxine Hong Kingston links the postmodern metafictional concerns of narration and language directly to her race and gender: ‘story-talking’ […] is what women do (2005: 70).
Language is an effective tool to demonstrate power relations, especially when it comes to gender struggles. One example that displays the men oriented Chinese language in *The Woman Warrior* is the following: “There is a Chinese word for the female I – which is ‘slave’. Break the women with their own tongues!” (47). Chinese girls grow up knowing that the personal pronoun a woman uses refers to the word slave. Since their early childhood Chinese girls are hence exposed to the superiority of men by using their own language. “Yet from this very language Maxine finds the means to articulate and redress her grievances” (Cheung 1988: 168). Even though her female self is actually undermined by the language, she uses it to express her thoughts and feelings. Basically, Maxine proves that her female self is willing to fight the injustice and she uses words as a weapon against those who silence her. Her female self has developed further and the writing process is her way of self-assertion as a woman, since she understands the problematic situation the language puts women in and reverses the power of it, so that the tool to break women becomes their actual weapon. At the end of the Fa Mu Lan chapter the baron who is responsible for the suffering of the village says: “Oh, come now. Everyone takes girls when he can. The families are glad to be rid of them. ‘Girls are like maggots in the rice.’ ‘It is more profitable to raise geese than daughters’” (43). As Cheung points out, “those remarks echo the demeaning sayings Maxine has grown up with - etched into her consciousness by her parents” (1988: 169). Maxine’s experiences as a woman influence the story, this is why Cheung suggests that the moment she beheads the baron in the story she symbolically expresses her anger and shows forgiveness towards her parents (cf. 1988: 169). We can assume that by killing the baron in her imagination she is also silencing the language that conveys such misogynistic messages. “Maxine’s first tongue, which has impeded her communication in English, now invigorates her adopted language with new idioms, fresh metaphors, and novel images” (Cheung 1988: 169). The protagonist is able to merge Chinese, the language of men, and English for her own advantage. As a consequence Maxine’s female self is able to experience power over men with the help of the talk-story of Fa Mu Lan. Even though the woman warrior then succumbs to the patriarchal society Maxine’s female self is empowered for a moment, which helps her to take the next step. According to Cheung, the imaginary woman warrior helps her to overcome inner struggles in the beginning, but the one figure that really helps her develop her female identity is Brave Orchid (cf. 1988: 166). Hutcheon mentions another important aspect concerning the relation of language and identity in *The Woman*
**Warrior**: “In such postmodern historiographic metafiction as this, language – nationalist, sexist, racist – is made the basis of the narrator’s search to define her different (female Chinese-American) subjectivity” (2005: 73).

There is an obvious generation gap between the traditional Chinese parents and their Chinese American children. In a scene where Maxine’s mother and two of her siblings wait for Moon Orchid, Brave Orchid once again notices the lack of understanding between her and her children, when they suggest sitting down: “No, she would stand, as her sister was probably standing in a line she could not see from here. Her American children had no feelings and no memory” (115). Brave Orchid senses the emotional distance between her and her children, which is indicated through the use of the word “American”. She knows that her children have adapted to American culture and follow different values. They cannot understand their mother’s Chinese way of thinking. As has been mentioned several times there is an invisible wall between Maxine and her mother, which is primarily based on the American self that Maxine has developed to which her mother has no access. Maxine does not communicate with her mother on the basis of equality. She is often put into place by the strong-willed Brave Orchid. “At department stores I angered my mother when I could not bargain without shame, poor people’s shame. She stood in the back of me and prodded and pinched, forcing me to translate her bargaining, word for word” (82). Her mother represents a strong, but also stubborn woman who is very proud of her Chinese origin. Brave Orchid’s strong sense for family safety and Chinese traditions may seem slightly exaggerated to Maxine, but she does not argue with her mother. However, there are moments when her female self realizes that her mother’s caring makes her feel safe, makes her even feel at home: “She got up and turned off the light. ‘Of course, you must go, Little Dog.’ A weight lifted from me. The quilts must be filling with air. The world is somehow lighter. She has not called me that endearment for years – a name to fool the gods. I am really a Dragon” (109). Even though Maxine sometimes does not understand ancient Chinese traditions and customs, she is aware of her mother’s love at that moment. Her female self sees Brave Orchid differently, even feels inspired by her. Despite the fact that Brave Orchid has often scared her with talking-stories, her mother is simultaneously able to take the fear away and create a safe homeplace for her children. Maxine realizes that it is among others the love of a mother that supports the growth of her female self.
As a matter of fact, Brave Orchid functions as a role model for Maxine though she is not aware of it. The protagonist’s mother pursues her dream at a time when “not many women got to live out the daydream of women – to have a room, even a section of a room, that only gets messed up when she messes it up herself” (61). Brave Orchid’s name seems suitable for her. The aforementioned scene plays a crucial role: As has been said before, a woman needs a room of her own to be creative, to be herself. For Brave Orchid, this small section of a room is the proof of her independence and of her ambition to get an education in midwifery. Ho explains that

In China, she [Brave Orchid] experiences the destructive forces that can be used against a woman in a village community, but she also develops a feisty sense of self and gains a level of independence from her sojourner-husband. In recovering the formative and progressive aspects of her earlier life in China, Brave Orchid reinvents herself in her time as a hero in a genealogy of heroic women” (1999: 128-129).

Maxine knows about the past of her mother and she may not be able to admit it, but she is impressed by her mother’s eagerness and willpower. Mother and daughter both experience a similar situation by being caught between two worlds, which is another reason why they are so closely connected to each other and why Brave Orchid wants Maxine to learn about talk-stories. They help her define herself as a woman, as it was the case with her mother. As a result, Brave Orchid’s female self is well developed even though she has grown up at a time when gender equality is a foreign concept. Maxine is aware of that and feels encouraged to assert herself as a brave woman just as her mother does.

As I have already mentioned, an important aspect of the female self is the relationship between mother and daughter. The female self is greatly influenced by the mother and her values as well as her world view. For Maxine Brave Orchid’s behavior is often a mystery to her and vice versa, which complicates their relationship. The struggle begins, because Chinese women take on the responsibility for the education of their daughters. Naturally, this means that mother and daughter share a special bond, but they are also prone to fight more because of their closeness. Ho describes the importance of that motherly duty as follows:

The care and education of children, especially daughters, has often been socially and historically assigned to women at domestic-familial sites. In such embodied, immediate, and permeable social spaces, many women construct and situate their understanding of a personal self and its relations to the family, community and larger society (1999: 35).

Maxine receives her education through the talk-stories of her mother. At first sight, the ancient stories about brave daughters seem to not help Chinese girls to develop their own
confidence, but rather evoke a feeling of insignificance in this huge world full of successful and brave women. *The Woman Warrior* offers numerous scenes in which the injustice women have to encounter is displayed. However, Maxine does not realize the importance of them until later on. Brave Orchid’s talk-stories rather haunt Maxine at the beginning. She is scared and confused. Ho, for example, states that the protagonist’s confusion concerning the truth of the stories is one of the factors of misunderstanding: “Rather, it is the self-conscious, awkward voice of an immigrant daughter attempting to assess her mother’s truths and fictions. The frustrations between daughter and mother are very evident” (1999: 131). In the story Maxine confesses that she cannot follow her mother’s talking stories: “And I don’t want to listen to any more of your stories. You won’t tell me a story and then say, ‘This is a true story’, or, ‘This is just a story.’ I can’t tell the difference” (202). Just as Maxine is confused whether the stories are true or not, so is the reader, because the author merges two genres: It is a novel as well as an autobiography, a mixture of fiction and non-fiction. This writing technique is a distinctive feature of the postmodern literary era. According to Hutcheon, “the borders between literary genres have become fluid” (2005: 9). While the readers struggle with reality and illusion, Maxine eventually learns that the question is not whether the stories are true or not, but whether they affect her or not. And they do. One of these stories that influences Maxine’s life to a great extent is that of Fa Mu Lan, the woman warrior:

> For someone besieged by silence, self-expression is a heroic act, an offensive with verbal artillery. In her fantasy Maxine merges with the warrior, who must train rigorously and endure harsh discipline before wielding a sword in battle. In her real life Maxine has to take speech therapy and work through "layers of black" before she can control the voice and the pen that are her weapons (Cheung 1988: 166).

The talking-story of Fa Mu Lan is an inspiring source for Maxine, because she is able to identify with her. Brave Orchid who is a perfect example for a strong-willed woman wants her daughter to hear the story of a strong woman in order that she becomes one herself. However, “as with the female writer who must assume a male pseudonym to be taken seriously, the woman warrior can exercise her power only when she is disguised as a man; regaining her true identity she must once more be subservient [...]” (Cheung 1988: 166). There is a double twist to the story that suggests “that only ‘manthropomorphic’ beings can offer guidance, inspiration, and salvation” (Cheung 1988: 166), which would mean that Maxine is implicitly manipulated to acknowledge that men are supposed to lead and fight. Based on Cheung’s thoughts, the talk-story then would only offer a temporary solution for
the female self to be inspired since the superiority of men is still perceivable. According to Cheung, this is why Maxine turns away from the imaginary world and to her mother (cf. 1988: 166), who is the real source of her power, the one that supports the development of Maxine’s female self with her mere presence and her talking-stories. Concerning the power of Brave Orchid Ho points out a similar fact: “Brave Orchid has a rich imaginative life, which extends its explorations to a female self not fully confined within masculinist values and norms” (1999: 17). Basically, both authors agree on Brave Orchid’s powerful influence on Maxine’s understanding of gender. However, Cheung’s idea that talk-stories are men-dominated and hence have to be dealt with cautiously, is a contentious approach. For this, I would like to refer to Ho who offers the following interesting observation: In every talk-story there is room for imagination, which usually revolves around the concept of wilderness (cf. 1999: 134). In the talk-story of Fa Mu Lan, for example, the protagonist mentions the “witch amazons” (44-45), who “did not wear men’s clothes like me, but rode as women in black and red dresses. They bought up girl babies so that many poor families welcomed their visitations. [...] They killed men and boys” (44-45). These wild women are a product of Maxine’s imagination. She has invented them to contrast the sword woman who maintains the illusion to be a man. Ho sums up that

Maxine discursively inserts this wild mythical group of women who did not hide themselves as women, but aggressively recruited and reclaimed lost women and killed men outright for their crimes in the Fa Mu Lan story, thereby subverting her mother’s story of Fa Mu Lan, the filial male-identified hero of her community (1999: 136).

As a matter of fact, Maxine has found a loophole in the men-dominating stories, which is wilderness. “‘Wilderness’ is the home of the female avenger and outlaw storyteller, an unexplored space beyond the prison house of racist, sexist images and narratives. This wild territory is to be appropriated and transformed into a rich and imaginative female space that displaces male power” (Ho 1999: 136). The wild is a chaotic place without conventions or order, which makes it the perfect place for lost subjects to envision their ideas of identity and realize them. Everything outside the borders of wilderness follows strict rules and constrains individuals, but within this area the possibilities are endless. Maxine does not deny the fact that the woman warrior disguises as a man which undoubtedly contributes to her success, but this does not make her less a woman. However, it seems to be of great

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2 In the Fa Mu Lan story the protagonist rescues women that are being held hostage. “Later, it would be said, they [the rescued women] turned into the band of swordswomen who were a mercenary army” (44). They are then called “witch amazons”.

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importance to the protagonist that there is a part of the talk-story that deals with women who fight as such. This creative adaptation seems to be rooted in her female self that seeks for feminine powers.

This awareness of potential female space enriches the daughter’s sense of identity: The self is not fully solid, unified or defined; it is more provisional, fluid, a decentralized entity, without hard boundaries, the outcome of multiple social, cultural, historical dislocations and relocations. The narrator learns to traverse this unexplored territory in speaking and writing as a woman, and not disguised as a male warrior” (Ho 1999: 136).

Ho’s observation is quite interesting when we consider that decentralization is a key term in postmodernism. Maxine understands the dynamics of one’s identity and is able to explore its vastness with the help of talk-stories and the development of her female self. Just as one part of a story can change, so can identity. All she needs is a space where she can realize her visionary ideas, which in her case she finds in the concept of wilderness. This space of chaos allows her to see women fight as women who seek revenge and achieve justice. Her female self is greatly encouraged by these woman warriors she imagines. For Brave Orchid and Maxine talk-stories and a powerful imagination are the solution to deal with patriarchal society. Even though Maxine is not aware of it, her female self is strongly oriented towards her mother’s. As Cheung concludes, “by stressing the formative influence of these figures, Walker and Kingston insist on giving women their due; their protagonists draw literary strengths less from the books of men than from the tongues of women” (1988: 168). These are not stories told by fathers, but stories remembered by mothers passed on to their daughters. These talk-stories are an essentially important part of Maxine’s development as a woman.

She [Brave Orchid] tells her daughter fabulous stories about female heroes and their extraordinary adventures; the transformative stories signify or suggest a woman’s resilience, courage, freedom, and potential. [...] This is Chinese cultural talk-story that incorporates the potential to express a mother’s powerful transgressive desires and discourses for herself and for her daughter in its Chinese American translation (Ho 1999: 127).

Brave Orchid’s intention for her daughter – namely that she becomes a strong, independent woman – turns out to be a success, but it has to be mentioned that her method to force women to be warriors is a path not every woman is made for. One character who Brave Orchid wants to help to become a fighter is her sister. As Ho states, “Moon Orchid does not have the strength or will to survive the aggressive woman warrior scenario that Brave Orchid has mapped out for her to play in order to win back her bigamist husband in the United States” (Ho 1999: 130). This statement leads to the assumption that a woman needs a
certain inner strength to become a warrior, which cannot be forced even by someone who actually has that strength and could function as a role model. Ho then points out that “Brave Orchid’s awesome power and love have constructive and destructive consequences within her own family” (1999: 131). In Maxine’s case her mother’s power is an inspiration that eventually leads to her maturation, but Moon Orchid suffers because of it. It seems that Moon Orchid has developed a passive self along with her female self. Her sister’s aggressiveness does not agree with that part of her identity, which eventually results in her descent into madness. Now that I have discussed the female self, I would like to move on to a specific part of Maxine’s identity: the silent self.

The Silent Self: Kingston’s Silence as Reaction to Victimization

Right at the beginning Kingston introduces one of the major themes in The Woman Warrior: Silence. “‘You must not tell anyone’, my mother said, ‘what I am about to tell you’” (3). Throughout the story Kingston portrays women who are forced to be silent. Maxine’s no name aunt is one of these victims. “The aunt obeys, submitting without protest. She can neither talk herself out of rape nor declare her innocence afterward” (Cheung 1988: 163). The “no name aunt” is not given the opportunity to defend herself or to call out the name of the man who is to blame for her pregnancy. Even after her death her existence is denied. She is not allowed to talk about the truth – no one would listen anyway –, so she never experiences the power that comes with talking. Cheung also draws attention to the similar situation of Maxine’s aunt Moon Orchid. She is silenced by her husband who has taken another wife in America (cf. Cheung 1988: 164). Kingston describes the aunt’s reaction to her husband’s anger as follows: “But all she did was open and shut her mouth without any words coming out” (152). After that Moon Orchid descends into madness. Maxine herself is a victim of silence and well aware of the problematic situation. Ho states that “searching for self-expression – breaking oppressive forms of silence and victimization – becomes a way for Maxine to process identity. She must find a new language within which to articulate discoveries about herself and her world as a Chinese American woman” (1999: 131). However, the protagonist has to go through a process of maturation before she is able to overcome her problems. Maxine confesses that she has always had problems with her voice and to communicate with foreign people in public places. Ho states that “In the search for a personal voice and self, the daughter’s awkward first steps are mirrored in her voice” (1999:}
131), which is best shown in the following scene: “When I went to kindergarten and had to speak English for the first time, I became silent. A dumbness – a shame – still cracks my voice in two, even when I want to say ‘hello’ casually, or ask an easy question in front of the check-out counter, or ask directions of a bus driver” (165). A simple conversation in an unfamiliar situation requires a tremendous effort to process on her part. The second the subject has to leave the familiar surroundings and march into foreign terrain, they are scared, which is why the home becomes such an important place for Maxine to grow. Mohanty describes this phenomenon as follows:

“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 within oneself (2003: 90).

At the beginning “being home” in Maxine’s case refers to her safe Chinese home where her family lives. The foreign people, the unknown places appear strange to the Chinese girls and the adaptation process takes a long time before they feel safe enough outside the walls of their Chinese homes. As a matter of fact, in her early childhood the family house is her home where she does not feel estranged by having to deal with unknown situations and people. However, the perception of “home” changes depending on the circumstances and the personal development of the subject. When Maxine distances herself from her Chinese self, she feels more at home in an American environment without the myths and traditions of ancient China, and vice versa. Especially the underlying misogynistic messages of the talk-stories let Maxine often drift away from her Chinese self. But then again, she has to face racism in the American world which of course has an impact on her understanding of the United States. The alternating selves can be a burden, which is one of the reasons why Maxine has great problems to articulate herself and why she develops the silent self.

Another reason for the silence is the cultural differences the girls experience in America. As has been mentioned before, Chinese communication is different from the American one. Chinese girls feel intimidated, their voices are weak and at some point they just stop talking, which is exactly what happens to Maxine.

During the first silent year I spoke to no one at school, did not ask before going to the lavatory, and flunked kindergarten. My sister also said nothing for three years, silent in the playground and silent at lunch. There were other quiet Chinese girls not of our family, but most of them got over it sooner than we did. I enjoyed the silence (166).

The way of living differs from what Maxine is used to at home. The language, the looks, the traditions, everything shows that it is not the Americans who are different, but the Chinese
girls who come to America and who do not fit in. As a consequence, they stop talking since their voices – besides their looks – are ones of the more salient features that distinguish them from the white “ghosts”. The protagonist reflects on this phenomenon: “The other Chinese girls did not talk either, so I knew the silence had to do with being a Chinese girl” (166). The perceptible difference between the Chinese girls and the Americans strengthen their sense of belonging and thus the feeling of safety among each other. However, there is more to the silence than what has been mentioned so far.

When my second grade class did a play, the whole class went to the auditorium except the Chinese girls. The teacher, lovely and Hawaiian, should have understood about us, but instead left us behind in the classroom. Our voices were too soft or nonexistent, and our parents never signed the permission slips anyway. [...] After American school [...] we went to Chinese school, from 5:00 to 7:30 P.M. There we chanted together, voices rising and falling, loud and soft, some boys shouting, everybody reading together, reciting together and not alone with one voice (167).

The silence described by Kingston does not allow the Chinese girls to utter their feelings nor to complain about the injustice, which implies that the girls are subject to racial discrimination and cannot defend themselves. They do not own a voice of their own to make their wishes and criticism heard. “Sometimes I hated the ghosts for not letting us talk; sometimes I hated the secrecy of the Chinese. ‘Don’t tell’, said my parents, though we couldn’t tell if we wanted to because we didn’t know” (183). The two different cultures have their own ways of prohibiting talking and Maxine experiences both. The protagonist’s silent self is obviously a great obstacle for Maxine. She still struggles with it, but “I’m getting better, though. [...] I am making process, a little every day” (165). The silent self prevents Maxine from saying what she wants, which consequently leads to frustration. However, she does not give up and eventually overcomes her silence by focusing on the written word, which I will discuss in the next chapter. The second part of the paragraph above deals with the sense of security within the community. As has been said before, the collective differences to the Americans strengthen the bond within the ethnic group. All of a sudden Chinese girls feel the freedom to use their voice and to make themselves heard. Chinese students enjoy the energy of the group, but despise it when they have to perform on their own and everybody’s attention is drawn to them. As a consequence, the Chinese school takes away the pressure and tension and leaves room for the development of their Chinese identity. Again, the safe boundaries that are mentioned by Mohanty play an important role here. It seems that Maxine feels closer to her Chinese self in her early years since she has not had the opportunity to develop her American self any further.
The frustration Maxine experiences when she is not able to talk is best explained by looking at the scene where she attempts to force another Chinese girl to talk, who never says a word. “I hated the younger sister, the quiet one. I hated her when she was the last chosen for her team and I, the last chosen for my team. I hated her China doll hair cut. I hated her at music time for the wheezes that came out of her plastic flute” (173). Maxine obviously sees herself in the shy, quiet girl, which triggers her fierce reaction to her. For the protagonist the girl is a mirror reflecting her own failures and flaws that she cannot yet overcome. The scene reaches its climax when Maxine physically and verbally abuses her to make her talk whereas she herself cannot control her feelings anymore: “’Why won’t you talk?’ I started to cry. […] ‘You don’t see I’m trying to help you out, do you? Do you want to be like this, dumb (do you know what dumb means?), your whole life?’” (180). As a child Maxine experiences her silence as great obstacle and this leads to even greater frustration. However, she does not get the opportunity to release the tension until she meets that girl in the basement. Years of silence, injustice and maltreatment are bubbling to the surface when she faces the quiet girl who cannot defend herself, which infuriates Maxine even more. It is her own defenselessness that makes Maxine so angry and all she can do is to punish the girl who is weaker than her. It might seem grotesque, but by hurting the other Chinese girl she actually wants to punish herself. In her child’s mind she is apparently not able yet to deal with the pain within herself and focuses on the girl who is the exact mirror of her own situation. Cheung introduces another interesting idea concerning the incident with the silent Chinese girl:

Her frustration with the mute girl reflects her own anxiety: Maxine is afraid of losing her identity, of being erased or unhinged-as her two aunts have been respectively erased and unhinged - through silence. At the same time, she cannot help linking utterance and coercion. Her protracted illness after the incident reflects her guilt and misgivings about verbal authority (and her psychosomatic attempt to evade the conflict). (1988: 164).

Maxine’s silent self scares her because of her aunts’ tragedies. The silent self seems to be the part of their identity which is to blame for their destiny. Maxine concludes: “I thought talking and not talking made the difference between sanity and insanity. Insane people were the ones who couldn’t explain themselves” (186). Maxine’s aunt is one of the women in the story that does not have any support to overcome her silence: “This aunt is not a strong person - and it is important that Kingston remind us that not all women have access to the remarkable reserves of strength and inflexible will that have served her mother” (Hunt 1985: 10). Kingston shows the reader that the development Maxine goes through is not accessible.
for everyone. Moon Orchid is the sister of Brave Orchid, but the two are separated for a long time so her sister cannot act as a role model. Moon Orchid falls prey to her silence and descends into madness. Her silent self becomes the most dominant part of her identity because she cannot talk to her own husband. The aunt’s story seems to be a warning for Maxine. Unless the protagonist overcomes her silence she is convinced that it will eventually break her as it is the case with her aunts. However, as Maxine will find out this is an obstacle that cannot be tackled so easily and it requires an enormous effort on her part to be successful. At some point she attempts to break the silence by making a list, which turns out to be a failure: “Maybe because I was the one with the tongue cut loose, I had grown inside me a list of over two hundred things that I had to tell my mother so that she would know the true things about me and to stop the pain in the throat” (197). Interestingly, this scene reveals the weight and the depth of her burden. It seems ridiculous that she tells her mother of the spider she has killed, believing she would be punished for it. Consequently, the reader already understands the extent of the damage her silent self has inflicted on her. It can be assumed that Maxine has already developed a minor form of insanity due to the silence she suffers from. Basically, she is already stepping into the footsteps of her ants, but she escapes a tragedy by focusing on the writing word. So, eventually she finds her cure, but for that she has to overcome difficult obstacles throughout the story that strengthen her personality and broaden her horizon.

One of the obstacles, for example, is when Maxine works at an art supply house and refuses to say the word “nigger”. Even though she is afraid to rebel against her superior and feels insecure, she at least attempts to make herself heard: “‘I don’t like that word,’ I had to say in my bad, small-person’s voice that makes no impact. The boss never deigned to answer” (48). Her voice has become stronger, but she nevertheless feels that her presence and her actions will not make a difference. The indifferent reaction of her boss reinforces this impression. It appears that he does not perceive her as a valid human being who has an opinion that should be taken seriously. Otherwise he would have answered. In a similar encounter with a boss whose values she does not share either she also takes a stand: “‘I refuse to type these invitations’, I whispered, voice unreliable” (49), after which she is laid off. Kingston then writes, “It’s not just the stupid racists that I have to do something about, but the tyrants who for whatever reason can deny my family food and work. My job is my own only land” (49). The realization of the frustrating situation helps her develop her voice.
Her silent self still exists, but she is continuously fighting it to become a valid member of the community and to learn to express her feelings. The underlying racism of the different reactions of her superiors is one of the reasons why she has to develop a voice of her own.

Ho pinpoints the essential concept behind Maxine’s silence:

Maxine cannot fully articulate the experience or nature of her trauma. That is, her narrative is traumatized in attempting to make rational sense of trauma. She suffers years of angry silence, withdrawal, and finally emotional breakdown; she spends years enjoying the silence and the world of her imagination, the world of Chinese operas and crazy women where there is space for the repressed and resisting self to explore its desires and potential. But this world, covered under black paint, also mirrors the trauma, the inner fears and anxiety, of a daughter coming into being and creative voice in ways which are not legitimated, authorized, or deemed normal, healthy, or functional in her multiple communities (Ho 1999: 132-133).

Maxine’s silence symbolizes the defenselessness of all the Chinese girls who are born in America. Their silence is a shelter from the foreign customs they have to face daily. Powerlessness, defenselessness and disorientation trigger the silence within the girls. It is true that their silence helps them to avoid unpleasant and unfamiliar situations. However, every word unspoken is a fight that has been lost. As Ho suggests, Kingston is absolutely aware of her development as an American girl that deviates from Chinese norms. The confusion that is based on the struggle between the American and the Chinese self creates the silent self. Instead of consciously dealing with their selves Chinese girls decide to lock the problems away by being mute. The pressure seems to be unbearable for the girls, but in Maxine’s case she will find a way of dealing with it. As can be seen silence is an obstacle that prevents parts of her identity from developing. As Feng points out: “Kingston and her narrator both need to resist the silencing taboos to be able to construct a selfhood. This selfhood, however, is not a privatized American individuality, but one rooted in her ethnic community” (1998/99: 112). Kingston and the protagonist do not attempt to define themselves in terms of their ‘Americanness’, but of their bi-nationality, as Chinese American woman. It is this revelation that enables Maxine to grow and to develop an understanding for herself as well as her background, which is why I want to focus on the reason for this change: Her creative self.

The Creative Self: Liberation through Writing

As I have discussed in the chapter before Maxine is silenced by her mother and her teachers as well as her Chinese colleagues. She struggles with her voiceless existence. However, she
finds a solution that helps her overcome her muteness, which is art, or more precisely creativity. At the beginning she paints to express her painful situation:

My silence was thickest – total – during the three years that I covered my school paintings with black paint. I painted layers of black over houses and flowers and suns, and when I drew on the blackboard, I put a layer of chalk on top. I was making a stage curtain, and it was the moment before the curtain parted or rose. [...] My parents took the pictures home. I spread them out (so black and full of possibilities) and pretended the curtains were swinging open, flying up, one after another, sunlight underneath, mighty operas (165).

Even as a child she realizes that art empowers her to express her feelings. The black curtain is her own muteness that prevents everyone else from seeing her imaginative and creative side. Even though she cannot articulate what she is painting she is already expressing herself more clearly than she has ever achieved through verbal communication. Her teachers do not understand the message she tries to convey, but for Maxine this matters little. She finally finds a way to express herself, to break free from her prison of muteness. She knows what her pictures stand for and she can see the “possibilities” behind the black color, which is an indicator for her well-developed imagination. It seems as if Maxine understands that art offers more than one possibility when it comes to problem solving. The moment she discovers the power of art, her creative self starts to gradually develop. This part of her identity grows with each completed picture and the resulting satisfaction. Maxine attains a power that she has not experienced before. It is therefore no surprise that she eventually breaks her silence with the help of the written word. As Cheung states:

Despite these explicit prohibitions, [...] the protagonists proceed to tell all - on paper. Their needs for self-expression are obvious: they hang onto sanity by writing; they defend themselves with words; they discover their potential - sound themselves out - through articulation [...] They work their way from speechlessness to eloquence not only by covering the historical stages women writers have traveled - from suffering patriarchy, to rebelling against its conventions, to creating their own ethos' - but also by developing a style that emerges from their respective cultures. In the course of their odysseys, the destructive weapon of tradition is turned into a creative implement, and speech impediment becomes literary invention (1988: 162).

The second Kingston unleashes all her hidden thoughts she experiences freedom for the first time. No restrictions that would silence her or people whose superiority intimidate her. She finally enjoys the intimate moments with her own thoughts and ideas. Maxine has always struggled with sexism, racism and other forms of oppression, and the only way to make herself heard is through writing. Being able to express oneself means being able to survive in a world where individuals are swallowed by the collective ideology of a society. The
communities she belongs to oppress her individuality and make it difficult for her to approach the topic of identity on her own terms and ideas.

This ongoing and fluid engagement with the dilemmas of self in relation to family and community is grounded in surviving and resisting disempowering monolithic mainstream and oppositional discourses and institutions which would erase or represent her voice and story in constructing their own exclusive narratives (Ho 1999: 132).

Every unspoken word that has haunted Maxine and Kingston for years finds its place in her book. The writing process frees her from the chains society has put on her. The years of silence and suffering find an end when she writes the book. Her creativity is not veiled by a black curtain anymore making it possible for others to see what she had been hiding for so long. In order to explain the power Kingston experiences let me refer to one of the talk-stories: The woman warrior Fa Mu Lan is a female swordswoman, who fights against injustice and oppression and who cannot be stopped even though she is a woman. Her strength is undeniable. At the end of the talk-story Kingston gives the reader an important hint about the real power of the woman warrior: “The reporting is the vengeance – not the beheading, not the gutting, but the words. And I have many words – “chink” words and “gook” words too – that they do not fit on my skin” (53). Kingston switches to homodiegetic narration when she tells the story of Fa Mu Lan. In a way this narrative device symbolizes that she can identify herself with the woman warrior and now it is her who has the power to change the world. Not by using a sword, but by using words. Maxine eventually becomes the woman warrior. “In The Woman Warrior Kingston's flexible talk-story encompasses the mythic past, the ancestral past, the familial past, and the individual past, as well as the present - the cultural and personal experience of the developing woman writer” (Lightfoot 1986: 56). By writing about her life, especially the injustice and despair she has experienced, she overcomes her silence. She eventually gets her “revenge”, which basically means that she has found a voice of her own that is now heard by all the individuals that have forced her into silence in the first place. Kingston is a warrior whose powerful weapons are words. The word ‘warrior’ evokes associations such as strength, courage and willpower but also masculinity. Like a warrior Kingston is not afraid to fight for her rights and for justice by writing about it. Just as the sword leaves its mark on the body so do her words on the minds of others. And most importantly, she is accomplishing her aim as a woman, which is an important message for all the women who suffer from oppression.
In order to make sense of Maxine’s development, a look at the relationship with her mother is necessary, which is a journey from misunderstanding to acceptance. Juhasz, for example, explains the dynamic of the relationship with the help of the narrative pattern:

_The Woman Warrior_ is “messy” insofar as its narrative patterns are several and intertwined. Complex is really a better word for the various kinds of narrative movements that taken together reflect the dynamics of the mother-daughter relationship. The move to individuate and the move to connect both arise from the essential attachment between daughter and mother; the need for separation thus exists in the context of connection. In consequence, the identity that the text establishes for its narrator is achieved through a process involving both individuation and attachment (1985: 177).

Maxine seems to have the urge to distinguish herself from her mother, but also wants to identify with her, which is the “separation” and “attachment” mentioned above. Juhasz continues to elaborate on her idea as follows: In the first three chapters the reader learns about Brave Orchid and the last two define Maxine, which enables us to draw a clear distinction between the two women. Nevertheless, the tension remains because of the alternation of stories that are told within the five chapters (cf. 1985: 177). Brave Orchid challenges her daughter with the help of talking-stories. “The mother creates her relationship with her daughter through the kinds of story she tells her” (Juhasz 1985: 178). Talk-stories do not only have the power to educate, to raise awareness or to promote courage, but also to deepen the relationship between mother and daughter. Even though Maxine rejects the tradition at first she follows in the footsteps of her mother by retelling the stories, which implies that it is her mother who supports the development of Maxine’s creative self:

As a child, Maxine resents her mother’s conflation of fact and fancy, insufficiently aware how the eloquent and valiant Brave Orchid is inspiring her; as a writer, she herself resorts to this conflation as a narrative technique. She puts Chinese notions in American idioms, but she derives both the raw material and the strategy for her art from the matrilineal tradition of oral storytelling (Cheung 1988: 167).

Again Brave Orchid functions as a role model. She is the one that implicitly inspires Maxine to pursue her writing. It is Brave Orchid who tells the forbidden story of “no name aunt”, which is how the book starts. Ho states that “in opening the book with this story, she [Maxine] subverts her mother’s more practical, austere telling of the story and makes extravagantly visible the secret that her parent and Chinese village have kept hidden” (1999: 136). Maxine wants to overcome her silence and by telling a forbidden story right at the beginning of a book is not just a powerful statement against a strict patriarchal society, but also a sign of the protagonist’s and author’s determination to make a change and break the
silence in the most outrageous way. The protagonist becomes courageous because of the development of her creative self. Imagination bestows power. The ending of the story concerning no name aunt is invented by Maxine, which is another indicator for Maxine’s growing creative self.

She also demonstrates her affinity for the ostracized Aunt by exploring versions of her story that are different from the patriarchal one. Thus, Maxine imagines her Aunt’s positioning as outcast, as wild woman, as lover of beauty, as sensuous woman, as beloved daughter, as adventurer and as risk-taker. Like her mother, the daughter imagines more than one way of seeing a situation, a person, and even her own life (Ho 1999: 136).

As I have already argued the wilderness is a space in literature that enables women to envision scenarios that otherwise would not have been possible. In the story the aunt is just a helpless individual without power. However, Maxine prefers seeing her aunt as a woman who acts on her own behalf and rebels against patriarchal conventions. She rigorously reflects on the story and invents possible background facts. “Maxine reveals the significant but often neglected and unspoken social-emotional investments that often underpin individual decisions, actions and/or group identification and alliances” (Ho 1999: 136). Once her aunt turns into an agent Maxine is able to connect with her story. Her imagination lets her process the story in her own way so that she is able to slowly understand her cultural background and herself. “Through her mother’s multiple stories, Maxine learns to talk-story herself; to learn the process for re-envisioning the universe; and to survive, contemplate, and enact alternative realities or futures for herself and her community” (Ho 1999: 128). Her mind expands and the possibilities become endless. Juhasz, for example sums up the situation as follows: “The daughter’s story, in turn, both deepens her connection to her female heritage and creates some separation from it and thereby control over it” (1985: 178). The great confusion Maxine experiences whenever she hears her mother’s talk-stories is reduced when Maxine uses her imagination. If Brave Orchid tells a story that Maxine feels uncomfortable with or unsatisfied because of tragic endings or mysterious happenings she reinvents it. By doing this, she is able to shift the story towards a more accessible direction, making it easier for her to understand Chinese culture and her identity. The story of the “no name aunt”, for example, is intertwined with her own suggestions, questions and ideas. Her creative self allows her to change a story to such an extent so that she is able to identify with it, which of course directly affects her self-perception.
Additionally, the story of the “no name aunt” is of great importance when it comes to self-assertion of Chinese American women and their approach towards their bi-nationality, which is explained by Juhasz:

In telling her daughter stories of female heroism that directly contradict many of her other messages about the position of women, the mother shows her daughter another possibility for women that is not revealed in her equally strong desire for her daughter’s conformity and thus safety in a patriarchal system (1985: 180).

Brave Orchid represents the women of her own talk-stories, because she herself rebels against patriarchal conventions. It is allegedly forbidden to talk about the “no name aunt”, but she nevertheless tells it to her own daughter, showing disobedience and autonomous thinking. Brave Orchid is a woman warrior herself. She sets an example of a strong woman for Maxine, which helps her to develop her creative self. “Maxine learns agency in the process of actively learning to articulate herself. Talk-story becomes a courageous act that leads to transformation and discovery, to the inscription of the self” (Ho 1999: 135). The talk-stories clothe her with power and simultaneously help her to understand who she is. As Cheung observes, “Brave Orchid's endless tales, which could well have clogged the memory of young Maxine, have actually nourished her imagination. From this mother tongue - her Chinese heritage - she now invents tales that sustain and affirm her Chinese American identity” (1988: 169). Maxine’s stories are influenced by the two nationalities that are part of her identity. In the story of the “no name aunt” there is no mention of sex since it is a topic that is apparently not discussed in Chinese culture. However, Maxine reflects upon the possibility that her aunt may have been raped or that she may have been just a women with sexual needs. These thoughts indicate the influence of her upbringing in an American environment, because her American self does not object to talk about the topic of sex. As can be seen, the importance of the talk-stories lies apart from the deeper understanding of being a woman in the establishment of a Chinese-American self.

Apart from the better understanding of herself, the power of talk-stories makes it possible for Maxine to approach her mother’s foreign world. Therefore, it is because of the development of Maxine’s creative self that she finally understands Brave Orchid. Ho, for example, sums up the situation as follows:

Through these writers’ various narratives of a self-in-process, the Chinese American mothers and daughters learn to name and to compassionately understand their differences as well as similarities as women and to gradually extend this critical political practice to an understanding of men, family, and community. It can therefore be empowering and heroic for women to tell their diverse stories and attend to one another.
In this way, women engage and challenge the institutions in society that would define, exploit, deny, or isolate their experiences and standpoints (Ho 1999: 23).

Maxine’s creative self allows her Chinese and female self to unfold by writing about the talk-stories her mother has told. The retelling is proof that Maxine finds a way to identify herself with Brave Orchid which hence leads to an implicit communication between the two women. When the women engage in this oral tradition the wall between them gradually diminishes. “These stories are located in the contemporary struggles of Chinese American women – mothers and daughters – to come to some understanding of each other at the sites they inhabit as women” (Ho 1999: 21). Kingston is able to approach her mother’s ancient world of wisdom and mythology and sees the world with her eyes, which definitely helps to sort out misconceptions about Brave Orchid’s talk-stories. Her creative self enables Kingston to come to terms with her mother’s world view. Throughout the story the two seem to miss each other’s intention. The situation changes at the end, when we look at the following revealing passage: “Here is a story my mother told me, not when I was young, but recently, when I told her I also talk story. The beginning is hers, the ending mine” (206). Maxine and Brave Orchid talk-story together, which can be seen as a proof that Maxine has finally accepted her mother’s different world view and sees the similarities between her and Brave Orchid. “At the core of the relationship between daughter and mother is identification” (Juhasz 1985: 176). In a way Maxine is able to identify with her mother, which of course alters the relationship between those two significantly. Kingston portrays numerous incidents in which Maxine perceives talk-stories as an obstacle or opportunities for her mother to scare her. However, in the end she understands the power this tradition implicates and makes use of it herself. Furthermore, Maxine finally approaches and understands her Chinese self as well as her American self. The vision of her mother becomes clear when she tells the story of Ts’ai Yen, who is Chinese, but her children are barbarians (cf. 207-209). The story is an analogy to the life of Brave Orchid and Maxine. The children cannot speak Chinese, but “imitated her with senseless singsong words and laugh”, which implies that there is miscommunication between Maxine and her mother. However, the ending suggests that both accept the situation and that communication is now possible: “Ts’ai Yen sang about China and her family there. Her words seemed to be Chinese, but the barbarians understood their sadness and anger. […] Her children did not laugh, but eventually sang along when she left her tent to sit by the winter campfires, ringed by
barbarians” (209). Even though Maxine and Brave Orchid do not share the same cultural experiences they find a way to meet halfway. Due to her creative self, Maxine is able to end the story with her own words. She has gained the strength to accept her Chinese self and her American self with the help of her creative self. Cheung concludes that “the refrain of this finale is reconciliation - between parents and children, between men and women, and between different cultures” (1988: 171). The immense power of talk-stories cannot be denied. In *The Woman Warrior* the Chinese oral tradition unites mother and daughter, supports the identification process and conveys culture.

Instead of struggling against her Asian past and her American present, she now seeks to emulate the poet who sings to foreign music. Not only have her Chinese materials and imaginings “translated well,” in the course of such creative translation she has achieved an inner resolution. As the lyrical ending intimates, Maxine has worked the discords of her life into a song (Cheung 1988: 172).

Because of her creative self, Maxine is able to reflect on her life, her relationships, her mistakes, her culture and of course her identity. The story of Ts’ai Yen offers the opportunity for the protagonist and Brave Orchid to accept and embrace each other’s differences. Especially for Maxine this is an important moment since she has never understood her mother’s sayings and talk-stories. But now she has become a storyteller herself and is able to see herself and her surroundings differently:

> It is this talk-story tradition that introduces her to the aesthetic forms and vibrant images she uses to construct her own alternative selves. Talk-story, therefore, becomes a heroic and subversive form of verbal expression – passed on from one woman to another across dislocations and relocations, generations, cultures, and continents (Ho 1999: 135).

With the help of talk-stories Maxine now finds her home as a Chinese American woman who has finally found the strength to express her thoughts. She does not have to define herself as either Chinese or American. One the contrary, it is of great importance that the protagonist understands the two contradictory parts of her national identity that merge into one. “Maxine must learn to tell and write her own stories in Asian America – just as her own mother Brave Orchid did in her own contexts in China and in the United States” (Ho 1999: 135). Chinese and American cultural aspects have been part of her life. She has grown up with Chinese traditions in the US, but only by allowing herself to be both can she find peace with it. Since Maxine has always seen her Chinese self and her American self as two separate units of her identity that do not have anything in common she was almost torn apart. Her creative self helps her to understand the hybridity of the two selves.
Ts’ai Yen’s story is also an indicator for the strength of her female self, again inspired by her mother. Ts’ai Yen is another woman warrior whose story is told by two strong women. The power of talk-stories opens opportunities for women to express themselves. The ultimate victory is the ability to invent a story together simply because they can. Brave Orchid tells the beginning of the story and Maxine ends it, which implies that everything her mother knows and stands for has finally passed on to her daughter. Furthermore, the protagonist’s self-perception changes because of her creative self. She is a creative woman who is able to form an imaginative world according to her ideas, which proves to be a powerful source for a girl that has once not even been able to utter a whole sentence. As a matter of fact, her creative self strengthens her female self.

**From Silence to Finding a Voice**

At the beginning of the story Maxine struggles with her American self and her Chinese self. While her American self is naturally based on Western values her Chinese self is nurtured by her Chinese mother and her worldviews, which are conveyed through the oral tradition of talk-stories. Maxine grows up in-between two worlds, which makes it difficult for her to see where she belongs to. She sometimes feels more connected to her American self, because it is not based on myths that haunt her day and night. However, there are moments when she embraces the opportunity to live in a Chinese community, for example, when she is not forced to talk in front of people. The feeling of safety within the ethnic group enables her Chinese self to grow. The constant confusion of those two selves triggers the acquisition of her silent self. Both parts of her identity, the American and the Chinese self, impose restrictions on her, which eventually forces her into muteness. She is overwhelmed by the obvious culture clash that silence offers her a comfortable shelter. Moreover, connected to her silent self is her female self. As a woman she is doubly silenced by society. Sexual oppression at the workplace, for example, adds to her insecurity when it comes to expressing her opinion. However, it is due to her mother, Brave Orchid, that Maxine begins to understand who she is. Her mother represents a strong woman, willing to disobey the patriarchal society, and sets an example for Maxine. Due to her mother’s presence her female self gradually develops. The protagonist reinterprets her mother’s talk-stories and finally understands the power of women and their talk-stories. However, to become as strong as these women imagination is necessary, which brings us to the last possible self that
I have mentioned: With the discovery of art her creative self is born. Her imagination and creativity offers her an opportunity to express herself. This part of her identity is the reason why she finally overcomes her silence. At first she occupies herself with drawings and she then proceeds to the written word. Because of her creative self she is able to report the sufferings and the injustice she faces; it liberates her from the chains of society and empowers her to tell her own story.

In The Color Purple and The Woman Warrior alike, breaking silence, acknowledging female influence, and preserving cultural and national characteristics are a coordinated art. These “speaking texts” expose the layers of silence that have threatened to choke the colored protagonists and raise the voices that have run the gamut (and gauntlet) of interethnic difference (Cheung 1988: 163).

With the growth of the creative self, her female self also becomes stronger, whereas her silent self is pushed back. Additionally, she approaches her Chinese self differently, because she herself becomes a storyteller like her mother and finally finds access to her Chinese heritage.

What becomes quite obvious is that Kingston is also fascinated with the hybridity of identity. “Kingston’s quest for narratives by which to represent the formation of a hybrid self could not end in the absolute and unquestioning embrace or recuperation of a cultural legacy or past history, or by a restricted range of traditional Chinese classics” (Ho 1999: 140). The talk-stories are an interesting way to approach one’s identity by reinventing traditional stories. The development of the possible selves in Kingston’s The Woman Warrior is more accessible because of the talk-stories. “The more traditional Western mainstream autobiographies are often chronological, factual, and unitary stories based on a notion of a distinctly individuated and coherent self” (Ho 1999: 140). The anachronistic order of the plot presented through talk-stories mirrors the hybridity of the self and the impossibility to pinpoint identity to a true core. As the talk-stories can change and adapt, so can possible selves. In the end, Maxine finally understands her Chinese American self, which once and for all resolves the struggle between the two selves.

**Conclusion of The Woman Warrior**

Similar to Morrison, Kingston draws the attention to a peripheral narrative voice. Only this time it is the Chinese perspective that complements the reader’s understanding of ethnicity. Kingston’s talk-stories open the mental door to a different culture with its unique traditions.
One aspect of it is mythology, the fantastic stories of warriors and dragons that shape the Chinese literary tradition. The estranged elements of the stories do not only spur the reader’s fantasy, but also invite them into a wondrous world of ancient China, hence the deeper understanding of the Chinese culture. It seems of great importance to Kingston that the readers seize the opportunity to experience Chinese mythology, but should also be presented the modern image of a Chinese immigrant family, which enables them to rethink stereotypes of Asian families. An interesting example of a talk-story is the one about the mythical woman warrior Fa Mu Lan. The narrative device that merges Chinese mythology with Modern American novels mediates the struggle Kingston faces when she attempts to define her identity. By doing this, the author raises awareness for the difficult situation of bi-national individuals. I have shown that the struggle between the ethnic self and the American self (the adapted self) is one that has to be fought constantly and is accompanied by a great deal of confusion. In my findings I mention several factors that influence the understanding of the self. First of all, there is the family that sets an example of the way the subjects perceive themselves. Secondly, the social environment plays a crucial role. Whether the ethnic differences are accepted or not has a tremendous influence on the individual’s identity. A negative reaction forces the individual to adapt to the foreign culture, which simultaneously initiates the rejection process of the ethnic self. Here, I would like to refer to Du Bois and his concept of double-consciousness again, which plays a crucial role in The Woman Warrior. Kingston accurately paints the picture of a Chinese girl who questions herself because of her ethnic differences. Her self-perception is oriented towards the judgment of others. So is Pecola’s, but unlike the black girl Maxine is well aware of her two nationalities and has a mother who is proud of her Chinese heritage. As a result, Maxine is able to handle the confusing situation in a more efficient way. However, it takes a long time for the protagonist before she comes to terms with the two nationalities within herself. At the beginning Maxine sometimes denies her Chinese self and sometimes she does not, depending on the situation. It is because of her maturation throughout the story that she finds the strength to deal with her bi-national identity. Only by accepting her double ethnicity she can make peace with her past and enjoy her present. The concept of double consciousness is therefore weakened, because the subject does not see the identity in terms of two nationalities but one, which in this case is Chinese-American. As I have shown it is of great importance to embrace and accept one’s ethnic self, otherwise self-consciousness
takes over control. Finally, the third important aspect is choice. The aforementioned change in Maxine’s identity only happens because she makes a decision. The protagonist chooses to break the silence by further developing her creative self and thus writing about her experiences.

Kingston expresses herself by writing about her life, the difficulties and struggles she had to face, but there is obviously more to it as Cheung points out: “Walker and Kingston take in the differences of being female and colored to invent self-expressive styles that bestride literary and oral traditions and project ethnic and national heritages” (1988: 172). Kingston herself represents a woman whose strength and willpower changes the literary landscape. She sets an example for all the female authors who at that time were too intimidated by the conventions of the patriarchal system. As a matter of fact, she sends out the message that Chinese women or any ethnic minority in a foreign country should talk about the injustice and not just tolerate it, because of a feeling of inferiority. Kingston is a powerful example of a single person who reaches thousands of women through her story. Also, the author preserves her cultural heritage in her semi-autobiography, which shows a certain pride in her Chinese self.

As they [Walker and Kingston] write about the voicelessness endemic to minority women, they pay tribute to the female bearers of cultures. As they venture beyond linguistic norms, they perpetuate and revitalize the polyglot strains peculiar to America. To emphasize these achievements is not to suggest that we forget Celie’s and Maxine’s nightmares, accept their afflictions, or discount their losses. Their ultimate success only reminds us of the many who, despite struggle, cannot achieve personal victories. I have called attention to the triumphant overtones to underscore the protagonists’ resilience and the authors’ determination. These writers dare to be themselves - to listen to their own pains, to report the ravages, and, finally, to persist in finding strengths from sources that have caused inestimable anguish. Their way out of enforced silence is not by dissolving into the mainstream but by rendering their distinctive voices (Cheung 1988: 172).

It displays strength to raise one’s voice as an outsider, as a member of a minority, someone who is sometimes deprived of the right to have an opinion. As Cheung mentions, there are many more who are not able to win the battle against silence. Kingston gives them a voice, and also functions as a role model. The author manages to let the reader be part of this identity finding process of the protagonist. She portrays a multicultural society that struggles with the differences within. The confusion of Chinese girls born in America is inevitable linked to their path to find themselves. Maxine finds her solution in art, especially literature. By writing about her life she develops as a person, she starts to understand herself and deals with traumatic events. She criticizes the situation of women with different ethnic
backgrounds, who are victims of sexism and racism. Kingston perfectly conveys the anger and the helplessness of the protagonist who attempts to fight oppression – unsuccessfully at first. In the story women are not given an opportunity to defend themselves or to fight the injustice. “In a sense, her talking story provides a kind of ‘talking cure’ for the narrator to reveal the racial oppression of Chinese immigrants in America and the gender oppression of a Chinese American girl” (Feng 1998/99: 112). The Women Warrior seems to offer a cure for all the silenced women in the world that have not been heard. Apparently, the female reader is offered the opportunity to approach her own identity, because she is able to identify with the heroine Maxine and her experiences.

Furthermore, the mother-daughter-relationship is of great importance for a Chinese American girl, since their primary communicational channel – the talk-stories – promotes education, cultural understanding and identity. Ho explains Maxine’s and Brave Orchid’s difficult situation as follows:

Brave Orchid is a complicated, powerful woman whose ambiguous stories of truth and fiction are fascinating and extremely frustrating to her daughter, who seeks to sort out mother and a cultural legacy from the precarious border standpoint of an insider-outsider, a second-generation half-barbarian, half-Chinese American daughter-writer (Ho 1999: 131).

The Chinese mother plays a crucial role in the definition of the female self, but also of the ethnic self. Maxine, for example, is able to develop her possible selves because of the stories her mother tells her. The talk-stories convey Chinese culture, which is an important way for Chinese American daughters to learn about their heritage. Even though the girls may not be able to identify with ancient myths and legends they still perceive cultural aspects that are important for strengthening their ethnic self that otherwise would not have been able to develop. It is their bi-national background that enables them to approach the stories more open-mindedly. Moreover, it is not just the content of the stories, but the talking itself which brings Chinese culture closer to the girls since this is part of Chinese oral tradition. The girls do not only listen but subconsciously pick up the ability to talk-story, which simultaneously makes them part of this tradition. Another important aspect of talk-stories is the growing bond between mother and daughter while being engaged in this oral tradition. Since it is the mother’s duty to educate their daughters they feel strongly connected. It offers an opportunity to exchange experiences and to approach one another. Especially for women who do not share the same upbringing the talk-stories can be an interesting method to understand each other. Kingston seems to point out that the first generation of Chinese
American daughters depend on the oral tradition and their mothers to grow in personality. Talk-stories are a form of communication that do not only convey culture or permit bonding, but they also encourage women and give them strength. As I have shown, the power of inventing stories or changing them according to the ideas of the female teller can be directly transferred to real life. As a result, women learn to gain strength and to believe in themselves because of talk-stories. Telling stories gives women opportunities to not just broaden their horizon, but ignite their imagination and see what is possible. They also offer a platform to exchange their experiences as women. Ho concludes that “these mother-daughter stories interrogate the multiple dilemmas and traumas at women’s sites of struggle within conflicting discourses and institutions that continually interact to delimit their power and options in society” (1999: 131). Kingston uses talk-stories as a method to let the protagonist become stronger, to let her develop her possible selves. If it were not for the stories of her mother, Maxine would still feel lost. Even the misogynistic messages that were conveyed play an important part: Maxine reflects on them and forms an opinion. She is encouraged to think critically and autonomously, which is a necessary character trait to survive in a world of racism and hypocrisy. I have shown that the image of wilderness plays a crucial role when it comes to questioning patriarchal norms. The concept of wilderness offers some space where women are encouraged to think outside the box and develop images of women according to their own ideas. Maxine, for example, invents “witch amazons” (44) that present their self-confidence by not dressing as men but fighting as women. According to Ho “the visionary stories seduce and unbind her daughter’s mind, allowing it to move critically beyond daily limits, beyond the patriarchal heterosexist ‘real’ that attempts to constrict her physical and psychic freedom, and at times beyond Western notions of time, space, and perspective” (1999: 127). Maxine is given the opportunity to break free from boundaries that prohibit divergent thinking. In The Woman Warrior imagination and creativity seem to be two necessary tools that a subject needs to make a change in the real life. The power of a creative mind cannot be denied. Maxine and Brave Orchid fight their way through life and challenge its obstacles with the help of talk-stories. Even though it is a long process no one will deny its success. Moon Orchid and no name aunt, on the other hand, are already too involved in patriarchal conventions that their imagination is restricted and self-confidence basically non-existent. The reason for
Kingston’s strong focus on creativity and art is thus quite obvious: Creativity changes life and offers a shelter when the subject feels lost.

The reader experiences the power of the talk-stories first-hand. Kingston manages to portray authentic talk-stories that enable us to be part of the culture, of the process of identity finding and of the bonding between mother and daughter. Without the talk-stories the relationship between Maxine and Brave Orchid cannot be fully comprehended, at least not to such an extent as it is now. The stories serve as dialogue between mother and daughter, two generations, two nationalities, but two warriors. Moreover, the reader understands the journey Maxine has to go through in order to identify herself as Chinese American woman with a strong imagination. The complexity of the plot with its different layers and narrative devices challenges the reader. In a way, the reader slowly grasps the difficulties and the confusion Maxine experiences when her mother tells stories. We question the truth of the stories, we attempt to make sense of them and we interpret them differently, probably changing them in our minds, just as Maxine has. Her frustrations are ours as well as her victories. Kingston has developed a unique way to approach her culture and she invites the reader to be part of it too. However, the readers need to be cautious when attempting to comprehend the ancient Chinese stories. The content does not represent actual China, but the mythological side of it. What is important is the tradition of talk-stories itself and the affects they have on the reader. In summary, I have shown that talk-stories can improve the relationship between two individuals as well as their understanding towards each other. I have also demonstrated that talk-stories are an effective method to convey culture to those who are not familiar with it or to those who want to expand their knowledge. I would now like to move on to the overall fascination of postmodernists with identity.

**Postmodern Fascination with Identity**

As Hutcheon points out, postmodernism is usually associated with terms such as “discontinuity, disruption, dislocation, decentring, indeterminacy, and antitotalization” (1988: 3). Postmodernism does not stand for unifying elements or generalizations, but rather the opposite. Hutcheon continues that “that the increasing uniformization of mass culture is one of the totalizing forces that postmodernism exists to change. Challenge but
not deny” (1988: 6). When it comes to writing postmodernist authors attempt to push boundaries, they challenge the “limits of language, of subjectivity, of sexual identity, and we might also add: of systematization and uniformization”. (Hutcheon 1988: 8). It is therefore not surprising that the concept of identity is also approached differently. As I have mentioned in the introduction, postmodernist theorists reject the idea of a true self. Identity changes continually and is a dynamic process rather than a fixed state. As Hutcheon mentions, there are no “fixed individual subjects” but rather a “flux of contextualized identities: contextualized by gender, class, race, ethnicity, sexual preference, education, social role, and so on. [...] the assertion of identity through difference and specificity is a constant postmodern thought” (1988: 59). The contexts in which a person lives and acts influence their identity. Pecola is abused because of her African American heritage whereas Maxine is silenced by her Chinese background. The first is uneducated while the latter goes to school and writes her own story. Maxine struggles to make herself heard as a woman whereas Pecola is assigned the roles of an outsider and a victim. These external circumstances directly influence the protagonists’ development of the self. Postmodernists are fascinated by identity because of the variety of selves that a subject can acquire. The challenge to investigate the nature of the self is consequently more complex than it was when there was only one true self, a core of identity within the subject. Again, there is an attempt to push boundaries and to challenge the norms. To understand postmodern theory and its decentralization of categories of thought we have to add the following adjectives: “hybrid, heterogeneous, discontinuous, antitotalizing, uncertain” (Hutcheon 1988: 59). Especially hybridity is an important keyword for the understanding of identity in postmodern theory. The self is the result of the combination of numerous factors, whose complexity form individuality. It is this complex concept of identity and the question of origin that form the basis of postmodern fascination for this topic. The dominant social structures have to be taken into account when talking about identity. Hutcheon explains the situation in the 1960’s and ongoing as follows:

Blacks and feminists, ethnics and gays, native and “Third World” cultures, do not form monolithic movements, but constitute a multiplicity of responses to a commonly perceived situation of marginality and ex-centricity. And there have been liberating effects of moving from the language of alienation (otherness) to that of decentering (difference), because the center used to function as the pivot between binary opposites which always privileged one half: white/black, male/female, self/other, intellect/body, west/east, objectivity/subjectivity” (1988: 62)
It is no surprise that the question of identity arises at a time when multiculturalism gains importance. The difficulty of understanding one’s selves grows when numerous cultures meet. The significance of self-definition in a world of mixed cultures is self-explanatory. But, as Hutcheon mentions, there are more categories that are used as reference for defining who we are. The complexity complicates the understanding of identity. Especially female authors with an ethnic background use this literary period to express themselves and to understand what it means to be different. They are not just women, but women with an ethnic self and they try to answer the question of belonging. Now postmodernism offers them an opportunity to share their experience as a woman and as a member of an ethnic minority. Kingston and Morrison both show the difficulty when the ethnic self is pushed back to please the majority. The consequences can be devastating for the subject. I believe the question of cause and effect is of great interest in postmodernism. When identity is seen as a construct of possible selves than external circumstances or decisions do not affect all parts of one’s identity equally. The constant progress of identity formation makes it interesting to see which events trigger which results and in what ways the possible selves are affected.

Conclusion

In this paper I have shown the two protagonists possess a variety of possible selves, namely an African American self, a Chinese American self, a passive self, a female self, and a silent self. Whereas some parts of their identity have already existed from the beginning, Morrison’s Pecola and Kingston’s Maxine acquire new selves throughout the story. I was able to show that by the extension of their identity the female protagonists have the power to change. The underlying assumption is that a subject is able to grow beyond one’s imagination if they are stalemated and forced to become active or if they are yearning for change that would improve the situation for everyone who suffers from oppression. With the character of Pecola Morrison has created a figure whose passiveness and self-hatred proves to be an obstacle that is difficult to overcome, which is the reason for Pecola’s acquisition of a dreaming self that offers a shelter and helps her to bear her loneliness. Kingston’s Maxine is also portrayed as insecure, but does not accept the situation, which is why the Chinese American protagonist develops a creative self that enables her to write about the injustice she has experienced and thus speaking for all those who are still silenced.
Based on these findings it seems that a significant change in identity is a reaction to extreme circumstances, but not necessarily limited to it. As I have shown in my analysis, the possible selves are influenced by external as well as internal factors. In my study I have suggested the term “possible selves” to show that they are not a fixed set of our identity. Depending on the circumstances possible selves are created or already exist and simply adapt to the changes happening around the subjects. The family is one of these external factors that greatly influence one’s identity. Especially the mother is a role model that girls turn to for direction in their lives. Pecola and Maxine have both inherited or acquired characteristics of their mothers that have contributed to shaping their identity. The self-perception of the mother is directly projected on the daughter, which is a reason for Pecola’s admiration of white beauty standards and Maxine’s willpower to fight oppression. Moreover, Maxine has developed her Chinese self because of her mother’s talk-stories which in the end she herself has mastered to pass on Chinese American culture. Furthermore, the social environment is another external factor that plays a crucial role when it comes to identity. If rejected by peers because of ethnic differences the subject attempts to adapt to the domain culture in order to be accepted. In case of the two protagonists this adaptation concerns language, appearance and behavior, and causes the diminution of the ethnic self as long as the subject feels excluded because of it. There are other factors that are not tangible for the subjects but influence the dynamics in a society and hence the lives of the members: conventions. In a dysfunctional multicultural society it is not uncommon to pick on one minority group to release some of the tension that may have been building up because of diversity. As I have mentioned in the introduction and as we have now seen in my findings, it is difficult to maintain a healthy ethnic self-perception because of competitive thinking or a feeling of estrangement. The problem is that conventions are accepted practices or attitudes on a subconscious level which hence are difficult to tackle. The society portrayed in The Bluest Eye is a good example. The black women internalize white beauty standards which is the reason they direct their anger at Pecola who epitomizes the exact opposite of these norms. In Maxine’s case the treatment she has to face is based on the underlying racism and stereotypes.

However, as I have mentioned in the first chapter individuals are not merely passive “victims” (cf. Baumeister 1996), since it is their final decision, their choice that initiates the transformation process. Pecola’s decision to become active and Maxine’s determination to
break the silence are the two factors that are responsible for the change within the protagonists. External factors influence the decision but it is still the subject led by intrinsic motivation who finally takes the next step. The protagonist of the *The Bluest Eye* wishes to be beautiful and sacrifices her sanity in order to achieve that goal. Maxine, on the other hand, is driven by her desire to give herself and every silenced woman a voice. Intrinsic motivation is a powerful force that enables individuals to become active and to accomplish their aims. Because of this inner source of power the protagonists acquire a new self or adapt it and push back other parts of their identity which proves the dynamic within us. Every decision directly affects the personality, but the extent of the consequences cannot be estimated. What is of importance here is that change can affect others as well. Once a subject develops an understanding for their identity, others also perceive them differently. Maxine, for example, becomes more self-confident with the growth of her ethnic self which influences the relationship to her mother whose understanding for her American Chinese daughter in turn also changes. On the other hand, Pecola’s descend into madness induces Claudia to reflect on society’s dynamics and beauty standards as well as hypocrisy. When looking at my findings concerning possible selves it is therefore no surprise that postmodernism has developed a fascination with the topic of identity. Since decentring and hybridity are two key terms in this literary movement the complex construct of identity offers itself for experimentation. In the two novels I have chosen different parts of the protagonists’ identity become apparent as well as the change they go through. Additionally, the focus is on women with an ethnic background whose voices were often not heard. Ethnicity is insofar of importance since the cultural background has a great effect on one’s identity and hence influences the construct of the possible selves.

*The Bluest Eye* and *The Woman Warrior* implicitly deal with the sense of belonging, or in a wider sense, the notion of home as influential factor for one’s identity. As I have pointed out, individuals feel safest in a foreign country among people with a similar cultural background. It is only natural, for example, for Chinese immigrants to gather together because they share the same culture, the same looks etc. Everything outside the familiar boundaries is considered foreign and frightening. However, the second generation of Chinese immigrants perceives the foreign country, in this case the US, differently, because they are more involved in the American culture than their parents. As I have shown, this results in a struggle within oneself which aims to find the right balance between the two
worlds one is trapped in. In my analysis I have found out that Maxine defines herself as Chinese American, basically saying that for her home is based on her bi-nationality. After a long process of maturation – in which she alternately either rejects her ethnic heritage or the American way of living – and by telling stories to express her problems, both American and Chinese culture becomes part of her identity, hence making her realize that she does not have to choose, but embrace both to establish a sense of belonging. Pecola’s concept of home, on the other hand, follows a different direction. First of all, she lacks a healthy social environment. Her neighbors and schoolmates despise her because of her appearance and her social class. As opposed to Maxine’s case, similarity or the same ethnic background is no guarantee for Pecola to receive support or even sympathy. She is not able to experience a sense of belonging in either her own community or the white society. Secondly, the Breedlove family does not offer her a warm shelter nor do they celebrate their ethnic background. Taking these aspects into consideration, it is no surprise that Pecola does not choose her home in the real world, but in her imagination. In this world of her own she has a friend and is beautiful, which is all she needs to feel safe and loved. Interestingly, both protagonists use creativity and imagination to deal with their problematic situations. bell hooks notes that,

> all too often the colonized mind thinks of the imagination as the realm of the psyche that, if fully explored, will lead one into madness, away from reality. Consequently, it is feared. For the colonized mind to think of the imagination as the instrument that does not estrange us from reality, but returns us to the real more fully, in ways that help us to confront and cope, is a liberatory gesture (1991: 55).

As I have shown in my analysis creativity offers an effective solution when the subject feels lost. Because of writing or telling stories Maxine is able to approach her Chinese heritage and develop an understanding for herself. Also, as hooks mentioned, she has found a way to deal with oppression and racism through writing. All the words she cannot speak out loud are realized in her writing. Pecola’s imagination, on the other hand, becomes so strong that she overcomes the obstacles of reality. It is true that she descends into madness, but for her this means she finally achieves happiness. In conclusion, creativity can either be a powerful source that enables the subject to create a place where they feel safe and which substitutes a homeplace that is desperately needed or it can be a method to release tension and to define one’s own identity.

Morrison and Kingston portray the stories of women who face difficulties based on their gender. In *The Bluest Eye* women tend to be reduced to their physical appearance. The
female community goes through an objectification process which results in defining them in terms of their beauty or their sexual appeal. The constant exposure to white beauty standards brings African American women in a difficult situation: The awareness of the expectations and of the fact of never being able to achieve these standards has a negative effect on their self-perception. White ideology undermines the development of female pride of colored women and hinders them to accept their physical reality. In the novel happiness and success are believed to be based primarily on external appearance rather than on the personality of the character. That false judgment, recklessness and abandonment have a devastating effect on one’s personality does not need to be discussed. If women develop a collective awareness for the beauty within oneself tragedies such as Pecola’s can be avoided. However, this is not just a phenomenon African American women have to face but a problem that is known all over the world. In Kingston’s The Woman Warrior appearance also plays a crucial role in terms of female self-assertion. The protagonist is treated differently due to her gender and her ethnic background. As a woman and a Chinese Maxine is forced to put all her energy into being taken seriously by her employers, unsuccessfully though. The constant pressure she experiences results in muteness. Her female self is usually undermined by the dominant male environment. Moreover, Chinese talk-stories portray women in inferior and submissive position, which does not imply that these stories are an exemplification for the ideal life of a woman. It is true, though, that traditions convey cultural pride and are hardly questioned. But in this case, the stories are used to strengthen the female self. Maxine grows as a woman because of them. It seems as if Kingston encourages Chinese women to reflect on what they are told and at the same time acquire the strength to tell their own stories. Women’s ability to talk-story gives them power, which definitely is needed in a patriarchal society. A woman may not have the physical strength to win against men, but they still have their imagination to be victorious. The Bluest Eye and The Woman Warrior encourage women to question certain conventions in a society. The novels offer two scenarios: First of all, a woman can be crushed by society’s pressure and expectations and secondly, a reflective attitude and a method to release tension, such as the talk-stories, can be a solution to perceive female existence differently.

While Morrison tells the story from the eyes of a child, Kingston lets Maxine look back at her childhood as a grown person. The reader is offered different perspectives which have an influence on the perception of identity. Pecola’s story conveys an immediacy that
enables the reader to be more involved in the story. Also, the innocence and helplessness of a child is more accessible when the story is told by a young narrator. It is of great importance that the reader understands the tragedy of Pecola’s case. It is at the end when the adult Claudia comments on the story of the little black girl. She is then able to see the events differently, to process Pecola’s story in a more reflective attitude, which makes it even more tragic, but also helps the reader to become aware of the hypocritical environment. Claudia’s final words emphasize the injustice and inform us about the end of Pecola’s life, which is beyond remedy. Even though the story is primarily told by a child narrator, there are other narrative devices as well that trigger an interesting effect: “As she shifts from young girl to older woman to black man to omniscient narrator, Morrison seems to move her examination of Pecola’s life back and forth from the axis of race to that of gender” (Kuenz 1993: 430). The reader is offered several perspectives in order to make sense of Pecola’s story. The recollection of Cholly’s past is necessary to understand his behavior in the present whereas the omniscient narrator tries to give insight on a neutral basis. Interestingly, Maxine tells the story with the experience of a grown woman right from the beginning and is able to reflect on the different situations, because she has emotionally gained some distance to them. Kingston’s narrative style is necessary to show the development of the protagonist. Maxine’s grown up perspective enables the reader to understand her feelings and her silent years. The young Maxine would not have been able to explain it. Moreover, the protagonist finds acceptance only in a more mature state of her life. As can be seen, both Kingston and Morrison manage to expose the female identity in all its layers by using different perspectives.

Kingston and Morrison both decided to give “outcasts” of society a voice. In the 70’s there seemed to be a need for women to express themselves in terms of ethnicity and gender. The society’s lack of awareness for the situation of minorities almost forced those two authors to write about it. Kingston and Morrison let their protagonists wander through a world of hypocrisy, injustice, oppression, and illusion. Both successfully demonstrate the difficult situations women with an ethnic background have to face such as ostracism, oppression, racism etc. The protagonists are helpless individuals who are exposed to the cruelties of their immediate social environment. The authors show us that society picks the weakest members and exploits them of their resources until there is nothing left. Both authors seem to want to raise awareness for the injustice and prejudice women of color
have to face on a daily basis. Morrison and Kingston raise their voices for all women who do not have the opportunity to do so. The most crucial element in their stories is the issue of identity. Especially for women with an ethnic background who move to the US, for example, the concept of identity is more complex. Both authors have a different cultural background, which is probably one of the reasons they decided to focus on the difficult situation of minorities and their struggle to find a place between two worlds. While Kingston defines her protagonist’s identity primarily by the relationship to the mother, Morrison portrays the fragile selves of a young girl whose only reference point is based on white ideology. The approaches are different, but the idea is the same, namely to understand who we are. Additionally, both books discuss the influence of society’s role in the search for oneself. It seems obvious that Kingston and Morrison criticize the illusion of free agency, because both books convey the message that social conventions implicitly dictate who to be. Officially, everyone is free to choose their life, but common practice suggests adapting to certain circumstances to be accepted. People’s reliance on the judgment of others still plays a crucial role when it comes to happiness and success.
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