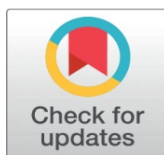


CRAVING FOR A NEW BELONGING: QUEST FOR IDENTITY AND BREAKING SILENCE IN MAXINE HONG KINGSTON'S THE WOMAN WARRIOR

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ABSTRACT

Maxine Hong Kingston, one of the most outspoken contemporary feminist writers, skilfully uses autobiography to create identity in her famous work, 'The Woman Warrior'. The book in a poignant manner brings out her traumatic experiences when she tries to find a place and create an identity as an immigrant in another country. Chinese immigrant women in the United States had to face double oppression, both racial and sexual and adjusting to the new culture was a real challenge to them. There is an intermingling of fact and fiction, legend and myth and the book owes a lot to oral tradition and talk-story, as a means of self-expression where stories constantly change between tellings. Kingston becomes the voice of the silent, voiceless women and writing *The Woman Warrior* is a cathartic and emotional experience for her. By unfolding her past experiences through the vehicle of the Chinese talk-story, she regains strength and independence and achieves an individual voice and a personal place as a Chinese American woman in society

Keywords: Culture, Identity, Racism, Diaspora, Displacement

1. INTRODUCTION

Diasporic literature is an attempt to negotiate between two polarities – exile and homeland. Every narrative in diasporic writing is both an individual story and a cultural narrative. Some salient features of diasporic literature include individual or communal memory of home, sense of alienation in a new society, culture or land, a need to retain features from the homeland including rituals, language, etc. and a sense of nostalgia. Chinese American history is the history of ethnic Chinese in the United States. Chinese immigration to the U.S. consisted of three major waves, with the first in the 19th century, second wave from 1949 to the 1980s and the third wave from 1980s till today. The entry of the Chinese into the U.S. became legal and uncomplicated and even had a formal judicial basis in 1868 with the signing of the Burlingame Treaty between the United States and China. Although the newcomers arrived in America after an already established small community of their compatriots, they experienced many culture shocks in what to them was a strange country. The Chinese immigrants neither spoke and understood English nor were familiar with western culture and life. They often came from the rural lands in China and therefore had difficulty in adjusting to and finding their way around big towns like San Francisco. The racism they experienced from the European Americans from the outset of their arrival increased continuously to the turn of the 20th century, and prevented with lasting effect their assimilation into

mainstream American Society. The first Chinese immigrants usually remained faithful to traditional Chinese beliefs, which were either Confucianism, Buddhism or ancestral worship, while some others adhered to various other religious doctrines. Christian missionaries had also worked in the Chinese communities and settlements in America. The recent immigrants formed new cultural, social and professional organizations which advocated better Sino-American relations as well as Chinese schools.

Transplantation in a new place in post-colonial diasporic writing produces a narrative that is often caught between a de-territorialization (the loss of place) and a re-territorialization. We have a vast plethora of Chinese American diasporic writers who make an attempt to deal with dislocation through an imaginative re-location within their collective memories, nostalgia and customs. Ha Jin, Iris Chang, Maxine Hong Kingston and Jade Snow Wong are but a few to name. Maxine Hong Kingston is a Professor Emeritus at the University of California, Berkeley. She has authored novels such as *China Men*, *The Woman Warrior* and *Trip Master Monkey* and several works of non-fiction about the experiences of Chinese immigrants living in the United States. Apart from being an advocate of women's rights, she is also noted for her anti-war stance, moulded by the horrors of the World War II.

Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts* can be analysed within the framework of diasporic and feminist studies, as the Chinese American narrator imagines herself as being encountered with ghosts once forgotten by the patriarchal Chinese homeland. This in fact, can be considered a memoir of Kingston's experience, growing up as a first generation Chinese-American in the United States. In an essay subtitled, "Asian American Autobiographical Strategies", Rocio G. Davis brings out how the first-person narrative form blends "selfhood and writing to stress evolving subjectivities, challenge contextual authority or claim agency" (42). The narrative structure of such texts throws light on the struggle for self-representation of the writer and this form is dexterously made use by Kingston in *The Woman Warrior*, which is to a large extent autobiographical. The book consists of five chapters bearing the titles, No Name Woman, White Tigers, Shaman, At the Western Palace and Song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe. Through this memoir she makes an attempt to reach out to other Chinese Americans who share more or less the same feelings of displacement, uprootedness and frustration.

The book opens with 'No Name Woman' which portrays the story of a nameless aunt in China. The mother, Brave Orchid, in an attempt to caution her daughter about sexual relations, discloses to her a story about her aunt, who becomes a family outcast because of her shameful pregnancy. Finally, she drowns herself and her new born baby in the family well when the villagers raid her house. The forgotten individual, a woman who was forced to choose silence under oppressive situations is once again brought back to life. The narrator in this section vociferously dedicates the story of the aunt's fatal experience in order to bring to light her unrecognized existence and female subjugation. She concludes the chapter thus: "My aunt haunts me – her ghost drawn to me because now, after fifty years of neglect I alone devote pages of paper to her, though not origamied into houses and clothes" (Kingston 16). The misogynist society which psychologically and physically ruins women comes in for severe castigation in this section. Chinese women are culturally destined to live under male supremacy throughout their entire lives. Even in ancient China, there was the bizzare practice of restricting a woman's body by means of the foot binding tradition. The narrator expresses her happiness and gratitude as she is no more living in a society of such tradition. "But my mother said we were lucky, we didn't have to have our feet bound when we were seven. Sisters used to sit on their beds and cry together, she said, as their mothers or their slaves removed the bandages for a few minutes each night and let the blood gush back into their veins" (9).

The second section of *The Woman Warrior*, 'White Tigers' is a fantastic portrayal of a female avenger – the story of a swordswoman derived from the tale of the legendary heroine, Fa Mu Lan. This section recounts the rigorous training undergone by the swordswoman and how she becomes capable of self-defence by wielding several weapons and through learning special skills. "After five years my body became so strong that I could control even the dilations of the pupils inside my irises... After five years the deer let me run beside them. I could jump twenty feet into the air from a standstill, leaping like a monkey over the hut. Every creature has a hiding skill and a fighting skill a warrior can use" (23-24).

The sudden shift from her own story to the story of the swordswoman is to emphasise the fact that the life story of the swordswoman is, in fact, her own fantasy autobiography. This emboldens her and instils in her the spirit of a strong and courageous woman and thus she overcomes her limitations to become a free and full human being. She says, "We could be heroines, swordswomen. Even if she had to rage across all China, a swordswoman got even with anybody who hurt her family" (19). She further says, "Those of us in the first American generations have had to figure out how the invisible world the emigrants built around our childhoods fits in solid America" (6). Through this creative mythmaking, Kingston expresses her adoration for this heroine who transgresses traditional gender boundaries. Ethnicity and racism, and along

with Kingston's identity is persistently recreated through the discourses of the emigrant's 'invisible world' and 'solid America'.

The third section, *Shaman*, arguably the most pivotal chapter portrays the character Brave Orchid, who is endowed with a strong will and determined personality. The title of the chapter refers to a person who acts as a medium between the spiritual and physical worlds. Brave Orchid is in that sense, a 'shaman' who exorcises ghosts, and her story provides a transition between events in China and life in America. By portraying Brave Orchid as a brave and strong woman, Kingston reinforces the fact that her mother, herself a woman warrior was not at all afraid to sleep overnight in a haunted room. Here Kingston draws upon a powerful female figure to bring out how the powerless and voiceless women can be transformed into great heroes who can save themselves and others from their miserable predicament. Like the woman warrior, the Shaman must rise up in rebellion and take arms against fearsome foes who pose a threat to her people.

Another instance, which brings to light Brave Orchid's warrior like independent spirit is her decision to retain her own name, contrary to the custom of taking her husband's name. Kingston makes use of the photographs of her mother as a narrative device to introduce the personal story of Brave Orchid. Thus, *Shaman* begins in China and ends in America with Brave Orchid finally deciding not to return to China. "Whenever, my parents said 'home', they suspended America. They suspended enjoyment, but I did not want to go to China. In China my parents would sell my sisters and me. My father would marry two or three more wives who would spatter cooking oil on our bare toes..." (99). Thus, Kingston proves that her mother is a shaman, a powerful 'dragon lady', whose success can be traced to her ability to talk-story.

In the fourth section, 'At the Western Palace', the narrator gives a detailed account of how her mother Brave Orchid at the age of sixty-eight, is reunited with her sister, Moon Orchid after thirty years. Though Brave Orchid's strength and confidence allows her to tolerate the injustices meted out to her in America, her sister Moon Orchid finds it extremely painful to handle the culture shock. When she finds out that her husband is remarried, she becomes a paranoid thereby losing her sanity and sense of self. Thus, the theme of 'At the Western Palace' is the contrast between American and Chinese culture. In the final chapter, 'A Song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe', Kingston further discusses the difficulties and challenges, she encountered while growing up as a Chinese American woman. Kingston is confronted with her first challenge, when she finds it difficult to speak English while attending kindergarten. This fear and embarrassment of publicly speaking English remains even during her adulthood. Towards the end of the chapter, Kingston proudly combines one of her mother's talk-stories about her grandmother with her own – the story of the poetess. Ts'ai Yen, who was captured by barbarians, thereby echoing the popular Chinese hymn, 'A Song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe'. This chapter, more or less chronicles the life of Kingston from youth to adulthood. The experiences of Kingston and her sister in the Chinese school, emphasize the power of language to create personal identities. Towards the end, she overcomes her difficulty in speaking English and she displaces her self-hatred onto another Chinese girl, who is even more silent than her and bullying her mercilessly.

Kingston's book exposes in a frank and lucid manner, the difficulties of growing up as a first generation Chinese-American. She exquisitely blends cultural myths with family stories and there is an intermingling of fantasy, history and autobiography which provides a coup-d'oeil of the Chinese-American experience. Kingston in 'Personal statement' makes it clear that "myths have to change, be useful or forgotten. Like the people who carry them across the oceans, the myths become American. The myths I write, are new, American" (23-25). Kingston finds herself torn between two cultures, and like other immigrants she must forge an identity for herself as she does not assimilate herself in any of the cultures. In fact, it is a quest for her place and the meaning of her identity as a Chinese American. As Michael Fischer tells, "Ethnicity is not something that is simply passed on from generation to generation, taught and learned, it is something dynamic..." (195). One of the factors that prevents cultural assimilation is that most of the Chinese immigrant women find it difficult to learn and speak English. Consequently, most of them have made a strong cultural defence from the influences of other cultures, by rejecting the new custom and preserving the old tradition from being eroded by American culture. Ultimately, Kingston succeeds herself in creating a life, enriched with both Chinese heritage and American culture and she is able to find her place, her voice and her own identity. She metamorphoses herself into a female avenger, the woman warrior who. As King-Kok Cheung puts it. "Kingston (she defends herself) with words: she discovers (retaliates back against both cultures, through the weapon of her writing her) potential – sounds herself out through articulation". (162)

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None

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None

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