

**TALES AND TRADITION AGAINST SILENCE: NARRATION AS POWER IN
MAXINE HONG KINGSTON'S *THE WOMAN WARRIOR: MEMOIRS OF
A GIRLHOOD AMONG GHOSTS***

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Abstract:

*The suppression of the women's voice is a conspicuous strategy formulated by patriarchal culture to keep a tight rein on the presence of women both in social and traditional realms. Much-eulogized movement of western feminism has largely disregarded the experiences and sufferings of women, which invited counter feminist movements such as Black feminism, Indian feminism, and many diverse cultural oriented feminist movements. Consequently, this plurality has definitely increased the scope of feminism in a plausible manner. Tradition, myth and culture are the grappling forces against which the discourse of feminism has to flourish. The patriarchal exclusion of women from the cultural scenario has rendered them voiceless, conspicuously in countries like China which cherishes profuse cultural heritage. The Chinese practiced polygamy and considered having concubines as an insignia of their aristocracy. Furthermore, the inferior status of the Mongolian race has further problematised the troubled consciousness as far as the Chinese women diaspora is concerned. There are only a handful of works by the Chinese American women writers which genuinely be able to capture the subtlest nuances of their divided existence. Maxine Hong Kingston's autobiographical work, *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts* occupies a prominent place in the literary oeuvre of feminism as it effectively confronts the injustices meted out to women. This article is an attempt to analyse Kingston's superlative skill in juxtaposing tradition, tales and reality and how far she succeeds in asserting her true self with the power of her narrative proficiency.*

Keywords: *Cultural Identity, Narration, immigrant, Power, Voice and femininity.*

A curious woman is capable of turning around the rainbow to see what is on the other side.

The aforementioned Chinese proverb fittingly encapsulates a woman's quest for the meaning of her existence and her capability to take hold of the unattainable. *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts* is a stupendous juxtaposition of the traditional oral stories and the reality of Kingston's culturally appropriated existence as an alien in the American melting pot and her perturbed journey into womanhood. This autobiographical recounting of her past and the significant women in her life give disseminating information about the indispensable patriarchal culture in China and the Chinese-American diasporic existence against the racial prejudices. The narrative revolves around five women in five chapters; Kingston's long-deceased aunt, "No-Name Woman"; a mythical female warrior, Fa Mu Lan; Kingston's mother, Brave Orchid; Kingston's aunt, Moon Orchid; and finally Kingston herself. The book makes extensive use of profuse tales, including familial and traditional.

The first chapter of the book titled *No Woman Name* unfolds the plight of Kingston's father's deceased sister who is precluded from holding a name as the family forbids her existence and ostracized her after the shame she had brought upon them by committing adultery. Kingston's mother forewarns her not to utter her name in the household: "you must not tell anyone", my mother said, 'what I am about to tell you. In China your father had a sister who killed herself. She jumped into the family well. We say that your

father has all brothers because it is as if she had never been born" (3). Kingston's aunt's choice to explore her sexuality curbed down brutally by the community. Consequently, the villagers obliterate their house to hunt her on the night of her pregnancy. The cultural inscription of the notion of honour on the bodies of women constructs the very consciousness of femininity in a patriarchal system. The body of Kingston's aunt is the site of her family's honour and equilibrium. Her conscious or unconscious attempt to break this familial and social equilibrium that has inscribed on her body is meted out with abominable punishment by the moral authority of the community. This apparent annihilation of her body and a further selective amnesia of her family members are a clear cut expression of the patriarchal mechanism of silencing through violence. Although the family has migrated to America, the oppressive weight of the patriarchal morality curbs Kingston's femininity as well. Her mother says: "Now that you have started to menstruate, what happened to her could happen to you. Don't humiliate us. You wouldn't like to be forgotten as if you had never born" (5).

Cultural custodians of a woman's body and her sexuality are the collective patriarchal consciousness of a community. Kingston says; "They expected her alone to keep the traditional ways, which her brothers, now among the barbarians, could fumble without detection. The heavy, deep-rooted women were to main the past against the flood, safe for returning" (9). The absence of her husband who has deserted her in pursuit of glory in the West is indicative of the absence of authority over her body. As Kingston continues; "But the rare urge west had fixed upon our family, and so my aunt crossed boundaries not delineated in space" (9). Simone de Beauvoir affirms in her path-breaking feminist manifesto *Second Sex* the resisting nature of adultery as the resistance to comply with patriarchal supremacy.

This is the advent of the patriarchal family founded on private property. In such a family woman is oppressed. Man reigning sovereign permits himself, among other things, his sexual whims: he sleeps with slaves or courtesans, he is polygamous. As soon as customs make reciprocity possible, woman takes revenge through infidelity: adultery becomes a natural part of marriage. This is the only defense woman has against the domestic slavery she is bound to (Beauvoir 88).

Kingston's mother's undertaking to make her daughter aware of the possible outcome of adultery and sexual freedom intimidates Kingston. Rather Kingston imbibes the notion of forced silence and subverts it deliberately by rendering voice to the silenced women by means of her narration. The narrative prowess of Kingston's lines while writing about the hitherto denounced story of her aunt is rather stupendous and seditious against the imposed silence. In this particular context of adultery, the word silence gains an ambiguous stance with gender sensitivity. The female partner has been erased or silenced from the familial and social realm because of the belief that her move of transgression would have grave repercussions in the entire community. But the preconceived silence about the male partner in adultery is ostensibly conspicuous as the patriarchy has to retain their authority by concealing and protecting the male sexuality. He has not even existed in the whole cleansing scenario, not to mention punishment. Her explicit remarks about the male partner in adultery are audacious because of the community's laxity about the male partner in adultery. She narrates:

Adultery is extravagance. Could people who hatch their own chicks and eat the embryos and the heads for delicacies and boil the feet in vinegar for party food, leaving only the gravel, eating even the gizzard lining- could such people engender a prodigal aunt? To be a woman, to have a daughter in starvation time was a waste enough. My aunt could not have been the lone romantic who gave up everything for sex. Women in the old China did not choose. Some man had commanded her to lie with him and be his secret evil. I wonder whether he masked himself when he joined the raid on her family (7).

In the second chapter, "White Tigers", Kingston juxtaposes the mythical and the personal. Deploying her

vivid imagination, she relocates the story of the legendary Chinese woman warrior, Fu Mu Lan. The second part of the chapter recounts Kingston's problematic existence as a Chinese American immigrant. She has to keep up her pace with the modernization of the American community without compromising her Chinese traditional upbringing. Her determination to prove herself during the college life in Berkley has ended up in disillusionment when the notion of an utter uselessness of her femininity has dawned upon her. "It was said, 'There is an outward tendency in females,' which meant that I was getting straight As for the good of my future husband's family, not my own ... I would show my mother and father and the nosey emigrant villagers that girls have no outward tendency. I stopped getting straight As" (57).

Kingston has forced to believe that women are quite incompetent in the patriarchal world. But her mother's oral tale about the woman warrior has given her the inspiration to be like one in real life as well. Fu Mu Lan's story reverses her troubled consciousness. "She said I would grow up a wife and slave, but she taught me the song of the warrior woman, Fa Mu Lan. I would have to grow up a warrior woman" (24). Fa Mu Lan is the woman warrior who leads her people to victory in the battle against an oppressive baron. Like Fa Mu Lan, she imagines herself as leaving home at the age of seven and being brought up by an old couple. She becomes a surpassing warrior under their intensive instruction in martial arts and triumphantly reappears in her home to liberate her people from the baron. Kingston deconstructs the myth of Fa Mu Lan in a rather personal fashion to express her psyche. Instead of using second or third perspectives of narration, she uses the first person narration. It is a self-conscious effort to gain voice against the atrocities of racial discrimination. Even though she has deeply wished to raise her voice against the racist boss in her workplace, she muffles the voice out of fear. In the office, her boss uses "nigger yellow" to refer to a paint colour. Kingston is helpless in defending her race when she says, "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" (59). Fu Mu Lan is the fictional alter ego of Kingston through which she can possibly defeat the baron. Here the baron assumes the metaphorical position of Kingston's racist boss.

The more remarkable narrative in the memoir is that of her mother's journey from a housewife to a graduate in medicine and again back to a housewife in America. As her nickname indicates, Brave Orchid is a woman with exceptional determination and intrepidity. Regardless of her age, she heads to be the most brilliant student in the college, which is an implication of her intellectual capability. Her mental capacity is observably apparent in her encounter with the ghost in her hostel. The metaphor of the ghost anticipates the further turmoil they have to face as women and Chinese immigrants.

Under Brave Orchid's influence, Maxine carries with her full of Chinese "impossible stories" with her in America. Similarly, "At the Western Palace" tells the story of Maxine's aunt, Moon Orchid, and her arrival in America to live with Maxine's family. Not only is Maxine absent during the major confrontation of this chapter, but she also is not even narrating. She slips into a third-person role, shifting the focus from herself to Brave Orchid, Moon Orchid, and the cultural clash which the chapter represents. "At the Western Palace" describes the collision of two extremes: China, in the form of Moon Orchid, and America, represented by Brave Orchid's children. Brave Orchid acts as the mediator between the two, attempting to harmoniously balance the two poles just as Maxine must learn to do. Throughout *The Woman Warrior*, Kingston gradually finds her own personality by examining heavily weighted "talk-stories", stories containing the mores and values of society throughout many generations. Earlier scholars, writing during the mid 1970's when the book was first published, have accused Kingston of inaccurately portraying traditional Chinese culture in addition to willfully distorting parts of history with low regard toward her Chinese-American heritage. Most notably, writer Frank Chin, as quoted by Wenxin Li, is said to have described Kingston's novel as "pandering to white tastes". More recent scholars who have written on *The Woman Warrior* within the last ten years, such as Anne Anlin Cheng, and LeiLani Nishime, however, argue that Kingston's rewriting of history in her novels serves not to change history, but simply to illustrate the

absurdity of race and gender roles defined for men and women throughout history.

The narrative prowess of Kingston defines both her psychological and physical strength. It is persistently used as a tool to remap her muffled voice at many places. Furthermore, it adds to the continuity of her community's uprooted consciousness. Probably most intriguing about the structure of Maxine Hong Kingston's *Woman Warrior*, beginning with "No Name Woman" and ending in "A Song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe," is that it characterizes Maxine Hong Kingston's memoir, told in the interesting format of non-sequential episodes, as one that begins in oppressed silence but ends in universal song.

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