

From magister dissertation: Chinese American Women amidst Cultural Confusion

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## **II.1. Maxine Hong Kingston's Dilemma: Western Feminism versus Cultural Nationalism:**

The Woman Warrior is Kingston's first work, it was published in 1976. It is widely recognized for its power and beauty, Chinese women appreciate the book for its boldness in dealing with the plight of women in old China. American readers consider The Woman Warrior as their favorite book because it provides them with knowledge about Chinese customs and traditions. The Woman Warrior's fame is also a result of the fierce debate over the book's genre and the nature of its audience.

The book which contains some incidents about Kingston's life has been considered by some critics as an autobiography. However, the work's genre shows that the line between fiction and fact in The Woman Warrior has been completely blurred, Kingston believes that, "I feel that I break through pigeonholes of what's fiction and what's nonfiction, of what an autobiography is"<sup>2</sup>. The debate is resolved when Kingston confesses that the work is a product of her fertile and creative imagination. English and American biographical scholars tend to classify her work as a mere fiction since it distorts the main rules of a serious autobiography through its way of dealing with both time and space<sup>3</sup>. The Woman Warrior lacks an ordered shaping of events and witnesses a series of alternations between past and present and a constant shift from America to China.

The novel opens with an image of women in old patriarchal China. The narrator's mother tells her daughter the story of her No Name aunt<sup>4</sup>, whose name was buried along with her unforgivable sin. She became pregnant when her husband was working in America and after her secret was discovered by the villagers, she killed herself and her baby by jumping into the family well in China. In the second chapter, "White Tigers", Kingston narrates the legend of Fa Mu Lan who led her people to victory in a battle by taking her father's place in army and by pretending to be a man herself. After the battles were over, she returned to be a wife and a mother. In the third chapter entitled "Shaman", the narrative moves from China to America and depicts the narrator's mother Brave Orchid. In China, Brave Orchid occupied a brilliant career as a powerful doctor midwife and exorcist. However, this image has been altered considerably when she decided to join her husband in America; she gave up her brilliant career to open a laundry business with her husband in California. The fourth chapter, "At the Western Palace", is the story of Moon Orchid who came to California in order to join her husband after thirty years. Being rejected by her husband Moon Orchid failed to assimilate into American culture and subsequently fell into madness. The last chapter, "a Song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe", depicts the cultural dislocation of the narrator, her efforts to grasp a female identity and a voice to express herself. The novel is based on the legend of Ts'ai Yen an ancient Chinese female poetess who was captured by a non-Chinese tribal for twelve years and who attempts to maintain a link between the barbarian world and her Chinese culture. In The Woman Warrior the narrator shows that her own story is similar to Ts'ai Yen, since she also acts as a bridge and an ambassador between her two cultures.

As a Chinese American writer, Maxine Hong Kingston is caught between the cultures of China and America. Her "Between Worlds" condition is the unifying theme of her novel. The portrayal of characters with contradictory and ambivalent identities clearly reveals the impact of the writer's cultural ambivalence on her craft.

The most memorable character in the novel is Fa Mu Lan, the mythic female warrior. The narrator's mother, Brave Orchid, tells her daughter the story of Fa Mu Lan who has witnessed the crimes of the patriarchal baron, against her village. She was moved by the pain and distress that the village's women suffered from. In a trip to the mountain, Fa Mu Lan meets an old couple who offer to adopt her and teach her all kinds of martial arts. Recalling images of rape and humiliation, Fa Mu Lan accepts their offer. After fifteen years of hard training, Fa Mu Lan returns to her village in order to take revenge on the baron. She becomes a warrior to avenge the injustice done to her family. Fa Mu Lan transgresses the traditional bounds for women to take up arms in a man's battlefield.

As an Asian American woman writer, Kingston feels responsible for taking off the veil that hides monstrous crimes against women in patriarchal China. In an act of resistance to patriarchy, Kingston creates the woman warrior character that is able to substitute man in war and defy misogynistic ideas. In a conversation with Karen Amano, Kingston states:

*I saw myself as finding and creating my own individual voice, but at the same time it is also the voice of all those people such as the No Name aunt. This's a person with no voice. She died a long time ago without a voice and I, through my own voice, can give her one. I can give a voice to people who have no political voice. Who have no personal voice. It's possible to give them a voice through my own work. So it is both individual and it's a universal or racial voice (qtd. in Helena Grice, 20).*

Like women writers of color, Kingston challenges both sexism and racism in her society. Through her work, she gives a voice to women as well as minorities who are deprived of their humanity. The story of Fa Mu Lan is the antithesis of the No Name aunt. Kingston decides to narrate the story of Fa Mu Lan after the No Name aunt in order to reveal the difference between two women. With the figure of Fa Mu Lan, she wants to show the possibility of being a woman warrior, "When we Chinese girls listened to the adults talking-story, we learned that we failed if we grew up to be but wives or slaves. We could be heroines, swordswomen [...] .Perhaps women were once so dangerous that they had their feet bound" (Kingston, 25). This idea is also evoked by Jane M. Ussher in Managing the Monstrous Feminine: Regulating the Reproductive Body, when she tackles the idea of foot binding. "Like circumcision", she argues "foot binding embodies one of the practices of surveillance and policing of the female body, having internalized the cultural dictates which position the fecund body as needing to be controlled and contained"<sup>5</sup>. Kingston's words show that she denies the restricted position or the traditional role of woman, and provides her female character with the incitement of being a swordswoman. Kingston is deeply moved with women suffering in China, she cannot bear the passivity and inferiority that were the main characteristics of Chinese women. Through her work, she tries to subvert the patriarchal ideology that considered women as the Yin<sup>6</sup>, the inferior and the evil sex.

*The –heaven help him- he tried to be charming, to appeal to me man to man. "Oh, come now. Everyone takes the girls when he can. The families are glad to be rid of them". "Girls are maggots in the rice". "It is more profitable to raise geese than*

*daughters". He quoted to me the sayings I hated. "Regret what you have done before I kill you" I said. "I haven't done anything other men-even you-wouldn't have done in my place. "You took away my brother..." "You've done this ", I said and ripped off my shirt to show him my back". "You are responsible for this ". When I saw his startled eyes at my breasts, I slashed him across the face and on the second stroke cut off his head (Kingston, 45-46).*

After fulfilling her duty in the battlefield, Fa Mu Lan returns home as a wife and mother, "I went home to my parents-in-law and husband and son .My son stared, very impressed by the general he had seen in the parade, but his father said it's your mother" (Kingston, 47).With this peaceful end, Kingston wants to show that motherhood is the central power of a woman. Femininity which is embodied in women's experiences as menstruation, pregnancy and childbirth is no more a weakness. In Hunting the Dragon in Kingston's the Woman Warrior, Marjorie Lightfoot, believes that, "Fa Mu Lan as a heroic role-model, paradoxically defying the traditional Chinese image of women as worthless"<sup>7</sup>. When Fa Mu Lan menstruates for the first time, she asks the old lady to help her stop the bleeding but the old lady convinces her to accept her womanhood.

During her pregnancy, Fa Mu Lan wears her armor in the battlefield but once she is alone in her tent, she takes off her clothes and contemplates the beauty of her new body. She feels no repulsion for the changes of her body; she looks in the mirror with amazement. Kingston's idea of glorifying woman's experiences can be found in feminists' works like Simone de Bouvoir's The Second Sex , the author suggests, "it is again impossible to measure in the abstract the burden imposed on women by her reproductive function"<sup>8</sup> .Here de Bouvoir is stating that we cannot devalue women's experiences and claim that men's individual life is richer than women's because women's experiences are also worthy. Fa Mu Lan like many women feels that the period of pregnancy is a period of introspection and reflection, which permits her to be creative and in touch with her body, it is really a reaffirmation of womanhood.

The character of Fa Mu Lan embodies a fusion between male strength and female tenderness and passion .Jargo Morrison believes that , " In her reappropriation of the Fa Mu Lan mythology ,particularly, she can be seen as attempting to construct a new narrative of femininity that is neither "traditionally" Chinese nor "traditionally" American , combining the assertion of female strength and resourcefulness with the celebration of passion and maternity" (84).

Kingston has managed to escape the traditional view of femininity. She defies the image of a Chinese doll and gives Chinese women the possibility to have a dignified life rather than being an object for men's entertainment. In Food, Hunger and Self-construction in Maxine Hong Kingston's the Woman Warrior, Paul Outka believes:

*What is so threatening about Fa Mu Lan's training is that she learns both to "contain" her desires –the "male" lesson – and to make them erupt in a channeled way. She learns in short, how to turn desire into real, material power. She neither blindly rejects "male" "self-management" nor turns her back on her own anger but combines both male and female stereotypes into a new, potent identity, the female avenger<sup>9</sup> .*

Fa Mu Lan is the model woman that Kingston presents to her female audience. She creates a powerful woman without denying her traditional role of being a wife and a mother. Kingston believes that a woman can succeed only if she manages to make a balance between her modern as well as her traditional role. The image of a woman with armor in The Woman Warrior symbolizes the ability of a woman to compete with man in all the fields. Having a career enables women to be independent and saves them from a life of servitude.

The strong bold tone of Fa Mu Lan's story has outraged Asian American male critics who believe that Kingston failed to represent faithfully the socio-historical reality of the experience of Chinese Americans when she depicts Chinese community as more patriarchal than it is in reality. Asian American nationalists like Frank Chin criticize Kingston's feminist concerns. They have attacked what they view as Asian American feminists' reinforcement and perpetuation of negative stereotypes of Asian American men. The harsh criticism that Kingston receives embodies the burden that dislocated women writers endure. Kingston expresses her frustration in a conversation with Perry D. Marie and acknowledges her responsibility towards her Chinese community, "Yes, this is the same thing that I have heard so many black writers say that they have to take the whole responsibility of race, then, at the same time, there are people of our community, other Chinese Americans, who will say "well, how dare you speak for us? Who voted for you? How can you make fun of us?"<sup>10</sup>. Kingston shares with other women writers of color as Afro-American writers the responsibility of presenting their ethnic community in a good and attractive way. They are urged to conceal the terrible vices of their communities and to defy racism because it is a necessity. This pressure leads women writers of color to experience a dilemma between the feminist and nationalist concerns. Jianhui Wang relates Kingston's ambivalence to "her confusion between Western Feminism and Cultural Nationalism"<sup>11</sup>. It is evident that this ambivalence is derived from Asian male critics' assessment of feminism as a white ideology and practice which is anti-men.

Kingston's dilemma is portrayed in the contradictory nature of her female characters. The title of the book "the Woman Warrior" that evokes a strong sense of resistance to women's oppression seems to contradict the first sentence of the novel "you must not tell anyone my mother said" (Kingston, 11), this is an order for silence. Brave Orchid's act embodies patriarchal ideology, yet by retelling the story to her readers, the narrator shatters the secrecy imposed upon No Name aunt and thereby threatens the patriarchal power that violates women's lives and speeches.

The contradiction conveyed by Brave Orchid stands for Kingston's ambivalent relation with feminism. Brave Orchid tries to instill old traditional values in her daughter through telling her stories that stress the perils and the pitfalls of womanhood. When the narrator reaches puberty her mother warns her, "Now that you have started to menstruate, what happened to her [No Name] could happen to you, don't humiliate us" (Kingston, 13). On one hand Brave Orchid constricts her daughter's freedom but, on the other hand, she offers her daughter emancipatory narratives of female avengers such as the woman warrior. This contradiction reflects Kingston's sneaking admiration of Chinese men. She may be strongly critical of Chinese men's assertive sexism yet she bears the responsibility to protect them. In "The Woman Warrior versus the Chinaman Pacific: Must a Chinese American Critic Choose between Feminism and Heroism?" King-Kok Cheung believes:

*Women who value familiar and ethnic solidarity may find it especially difficult to rally to the feminist cause without feeling divided or without being accused of the betrayal, especially*

*when the men in their ethnic groups also face social inequities. Kingston, for instance, has tried throughout her work to mediate between affirming her ethnic heritage and undermining patriarchy. But she feels that identification with Asian men at times inhibits an equally strong feminist impulse*<sup>12</sup>.

Because of her ambiguous feelings towards her Chinese men, Kingston's feminism is hampered. This tendency is shared by women writers of color who are forced to allow the power of racism to overshadow that of sexism. Despite the fact that women writers report crimes against minority men in their writing, they try to justify those crimes by attributing them to the racism that minority men fall prey to. When Kingston discusses wife beating in ethnic communities, she suggests, "but I have a feeling that is probably worse among the minorities, when you face the frustration of not being realized as a human being, that human energy comes out in this mad way" (185). Kingston believes that Chinese men's abuse of women is merely a response to the racial discrimination that Chinese men endure within American society; women's oppression is an outlet for their fierce anger at their marginalization.

In The Woman Warrior, there are some scenes which evoke a patriarchal discourse. Brave Orchid seems to be a champion of contradictions in the novel. While she transcends the restricted role of a woman through her decision to be a doctor, Brave Orchid defends patriarchy when she accompanies her daughter to the market in order to buy a slave girl. This scene is very humiliating and painful; parents sell their daughters because they are unable to cover their needs. Slaveholders negotiate with customers about the appropriate price regarding the capacities of a slave girl.

Another strong contradiction is experienced by the unnamed narrator when she discloses her speech problems. The narrator recalls the incident of tongue-cutting, "She pushed my tongue up and sliced the fraenum. Or maybe she snipped it, only telling me about it, but all during childhood I felt sorry for the baby whose mother waited with scissors or knife in hand for it to cry- and then, when its mouth was wide open like a baby bird's, cut. The Chinese say a ready tongue is an evil" (Kingston, 148).

On one hand, this act evokes a strong violence that disturbs the narrator to such a point as to develop ambivalent feelings toward her mother, and by extension, her mother's Chinese culture. The act is considered as a way to silence her. On the other hand, tongue cutting can be seen as an act of liberation, "Sometimes I felt very proud that my mother committed such a powerful act upon me" (Kingston, 148). The descriptive phrase "a powerful act" expresses the ambiguity of the narrator, by cutting her tongue, her mother frees her from the restrictions of being passive. The mother's explanation reveals her intentions, "I cut it so you would not be tongue-tied. Your tongue would be able to move in any language. You'll be able to speak languages that are not completely different from one another" (Kingston, 148). Brave Orchid's act of tongue-cutting reveals her ambivalence about the conception of a good woman; she straddles between the possibility of being an obedient wife and the dream of being a woman warrior.

The controversial portrayal of her female characters shows that Kingston is trapped between her sense of rebellion and her loyalty. King-Kok Cheung suggests, "Chinese American women writers may find a way to negotiate the tangle of sexual and racial politics in all its intricacies, not just out of a desire for revenge but also out of a sense of loyalty" (168).

Kingston's loyalty to her ethnic community and her strong sense of identification with Chinese men hinders her from having a powerful and bold feminism. As a dislocated writer, she experiences the burden as well as the pleasure of her bi-cultural position. The advantageous aspect of her status is revealed in the creativity of her characterization. Depicting characters that are brimmed with contradictions is an effective way to address persons with hyphenated identities.