

Braving out in the Face of Constraints: The Woman Warrior

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Abstract—The study attempts to critique mainstream feminist thinking through texts written by the representative ethnic woman of color in America. It has looked into the disputes of historical relationship between racism and white feminism, between self-aggrandizement by white feminism and theoretical activism by women of color in order to see whether cultural power is evenly distributed. This critique also involves surmising of woman of color as “the other” in mainstream feminist discourse.

The major thrust of this study is not only to interrogate the writer from a feminist perspective or to look at her from a linguistic or narrative point of view, but also to analyze the issues of ‘Double Consciousness’ in ethnic feminists, or feminists of color.

Therefore, this study has investigated this writer beyond the singular feminist or narrative perspectives and studied her interfacing the historical and racial perspectives and illiciting her response to white feminist thinking patterns and bringing out the ‘double consciousness’ from which the woman suffers.

Index Terms—Double consciousness, cultural power, oppression, white feminism culture, racism.

I. INTRODUCTION

Besides looking at ‘white’ and ‘other’ feminist consciousness the study argues that racism is experienced differently by different groups, that each group has a distinct historical experience as a radicalized community within the United States. The Blacks interpret their experience in terms of the historical context of slavery; for Chicanos, this historical context is shaped by annexation and the treaty of Guadalupe Hildago; for Native Americans the experience of dispossession and genocidal violence shapes that racial history, while for Asian Americans, immigration and the history of indentured labor underlie a distinctive historical experience. For women the experience of feminine sexuality is different according to their distinct ethnic or racial identity: to take the example of religion, Chicanos may be subject to the traditional gender constraints of Catholicism, some Asian American women to those of Oriental Confucianism, Native religions, and Black women to the constraints placed upon women by Evangelical Christianity. Correspondingly, masculinity is constructed differently according to each racial or ethnic group – for example, Chicanos invented the term ‘machismo’ and femininity is defined in opposition to these dominant images of masculine gender identity.

Both Alice Walker and Maxine Hong Kingston, among other ethnic women writers, have been criticized by men within their racial group for portraying the oppression of women not by white men but by men of colour and thus for

representing radicalized masculinity in negative terms. This means that women in each racial group need to express the ways in which their individual experience of their sexuality is mediated by their racial identity. These other women suffer from “double consciousness”. The phrase ‘double consciousness’ or double stigma describes the oppression of the individual both as a woman and as a member of an ethnic minority; or in other words, the divergent experience of what one is in oneself versus the cultural image imposed by the racism of others.

One of the most outspoken contemporary feminist writers, Maxine Hong Kingston states in her autobiographical book *The Woman Warrior* (1976), “The swordswoman and I are not so dissimilar.....What we have in common are the words at our backs. The idioms for revenge are ‘report a crime’ and ‘report to five families’. The reporting is the vengeance – not the beheading, not the gutting, but the words”. With prose that both unsettled Chinese American sexism and American racism, Kingston is a “word warrior” who battles social and racial injustice. It is perhaps surprising that Kingston could not speak English until she started school. Once she had learned it, however, she started to talk stories. Decades later, this once silent and silenced woman is becoming a notable American writer. Maxine Hong Kingston was born to Chinese immigrant parents on 27 October 1940. Her American name, Maxine, was after a blonde who was always lucky in gambling. Ting, her Chinese name, comes from a Chinese poem about self-reliance.

Her community also played a decisive role in Kingston’s writing. Comparing herself to Toni Morrison and Leslie Silko, Kingston argues that what makes their writings vivid and alive is their connection with community and tribe. Moreover, the physical environment and social class in which Kingston grew up played an important role in her “education” as a writer. Kingston spent her childhood on the south side of Stockton, an area populated by mostly working-class and unemployed people of mixed races.

No matter how her works are received, Kingston succeeds in her revenge by reporting the crimes of sexism and racism. Despite her diminutive physical stature, she deserves the title of a word warrior in every sense. Kingston’s literary innovations are also significant contributions to American literature. As Kingston herself says, I am creating part of American literature Contemporary American literature has been enriched by addition of the powerful words of Maxine Hong Kingston, and Feminism has received added dimensions through her writing.

II. THE WOMAN WARRIOR

In *The Woman Warrior*, Maxine Hong Kingston rebels against conventions - those of writing and those of her culture and the result is an eloquent piece of literature about a woman warrior. Kingston rises above the conflict and confusion of

her life to create a reality for herself that is a compendium of all the talk-stories, all the women, and all the cultural influences that have affected her. Kingston finds her own voice and finds peace through the very act of writing her memoirs.

The Woman Warrior is the memoir of Maxine Hong Kingston's experience growing up as a first-generation Chinese American. In it, she tells the stories of several other women to reveal the struggles and issues that have affected her own life. In telling their stories, she is telling her own stories because Kingston herself is a compilation of all the women in her book. In *The Woman Warrior*, Kingston reveals the cultural conflicts that have affected her and how, ultimately, she is able to fight back and find her own identity.

Kingston's main project in *The Woman Warrior* is to avenge oppression by reporting stories about the women in her family. The book opens with "No Name Women", a story of another nameless aunt in China. This aunt became a family outcast for getting pregnant out of wedlock and finally drowned herself and her newborn baby in the family well after the villagers raided her house. Brave Orchid reveals this family secret to the young Maxine on the onset of the daughter's menstruation to caution her against sexual indiscretion. At the same time, the mother attempts to suppress this story by forbidding the daughter to repeat it. Kingston, however, purposely reports the story as an act of political resistance to Chinese patriarchy and repression in general.

In "At the Western Palace", the fourth section "*The Women Warrior*", Kingston tells the story of her other silent Chinese aunt, Moon Orchid. The "thrice-told tale"- told to Kingston by her sister, who in turn heard it from her brother – is the only third-person narrative in the book, and it communicates the hazard of poor adjustment to American reality. Moon Orchid, whose name insinuates to her insubstantial presence, has lived comfortably in Hong Kong on the subsidy from her husband. Through the manipulation of Brave Orchid, Moon Orchid is forced to come to America to collect her lost husband and claim her title of first wife. After she discovers her thoroughly Americanized husband, a successful doctor who has remarried, to an English-speaking wife, Moon Orchid's old Chinese life based on an illusion of changeless stability is shattered.

The second section of *The Women Warrior*, "White Tigers", is an often anthologized and discussed part of the book because of its fantastic portrayal of a female avenger. This story of the swordswoman is derived from the tale of the legendary Chinese heroine Fa Mu Lan, who substitutes for her aging father in a military conscription.

In "Personal Statement" Kingston explains 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. In "White Tigers", for example, Kingston creatively rewrote traditional myths and appropriates male heroic legends for her woman warrior. Through this creative mythmaking Kingston created a heroine who transgresses traditional gender boundaries. The sword-women describe how her parents carve their names, vows, and grievances on her back. Although undeniable an act of bodily mutilation, this act re-resents a coveted family

acknowledgment for Chinese and Chinese American women.

The mother's story, "Shaman" is situated in the middle of the book. *The Woman Warrior* not only chronicles the development of the daughter Maxine but also the mother's struggle for self-definition. "Shaman" records Brave Orchid's passage from a traditional woman to a respectable woman doctor.

At the end of *The Women Warrior*, Maxine finishes her story of development with a return to her matrilineage. This reconnection is mediated through that talk story. The daughter continues the story that her mother has started "The beginning is hers, the ending, mine" telling about T'sai Yen, a poet who had been abducted by a nomadic tribe, had two children with the barbarian chieftain, and later was ransomed back to China. Thus, the interpenetrating stories in *The Woman Warrior* provide a link between Kingston's past and present. The central metaphor of the book is a Chinese knot in which various strands are interwoven into a work of folk art. Kingston, as "an outlaw knot-maker", weaves the past and the present together into an intricate pattern to reveal her views about her double consciousness.

The novel is a complex work which mixes voices, styles, fiction, and reality as it provides readers a glimpse into the Chinese-American experience. Typically regarded as an autobiography, Kingston's memoir greatly diverges from the typical conventions of this genre. Kingston skillfully weaves the forms of autobiography, fiction, history, and mythology into a multi-layered work of art. Most autobiographies focus on the author, taking an introspective look into his or her mind and life, usually containing a consistent first person "I" narration throughout. Kingston's autobiography, on the other hand, tells the tales of several women, both real and fictional, whose stories have shaped her life. Her book does not follow a linear pattern, and it often becomes difficult to discern what fact is and what fiction is. In fact, since most of Kingston's stories are told to her second-hand by her mother or by someone else, it is hard to discern the validity of any of her accounts. However, the factual truth of Kingston's stories is not important, but rather how she comes to terms with them and how she incorporates them into herself.

The story does not function as a tale of individualism. Rather it details her search for her place within the community and her family and the meaning of her identity as a Chinese-American. The story of the protagonist is intertwined with her relationship with her mother, and *The Woman Warrior* tells the story of the protagonist's mother and is as much a story of her relationship to her mother as it is "about" the protagonist. Kingston, by emphasizing the social aspect of an individual identity, broadens the scope of autobiography to include the constant negotiations with different social structures that make up the shifting ground of ethnicity. 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). Ethnicity, in *The Woman Warrior*, cannot be understood as an individualist experience but has meaning only within a social context. It resides within a social dynamic. The book's protagonist says, "[We] have had to figure out how the invisible world the emigrants built around

our childhoods fits into solid America" (Woman 6). Ethnicity, and by extension Kingston's identity, is constantly being created through the competing discourses of the emigrant's "invisible world" and "solid America."

Kingston's book sheds light on the treatment of women in pre-Communist China. Women were considered substandard to men and were only valued in terms of their obedience, their service, and their ability to give birth to boys. Girls are sold as slaves by their families and men have more than one wife. Kingston is haunted by her mother's tales of killing baby girls back in China and learns the notion of "wife-slave" that the Chinese emigrants brought with them to America: "When we Chinese girls listened to the adults talk-story, we learned that we failed if we grew up to be but wives or slaves" (Kingston 19). This idea of women's subservience to men is ingrained in the minds of the children of emigrants as the right way, the only way.

The idea that women were viewed as a commodity, an object owned by men, is confirmed by Kingston's own father: "A husband may kill a wife who disobeys him. Confucius said that"(193). Such oppressive treatment of women is condoned and furthered by Brave Orchid, who carries the traditions of her people through her own practices of self-denial, through the labeling of all Americans as ghosts, and through her talk-stories. In the story of No Name Woman, China is depicted as a world of strict rules and social codes, where honor is paramount and privacy does not exist. Juxtaposing Brave Orchid and Fa Mu Lan, No Name Woman does not partake in the abnegation required of women; she does not insist on doing what is best for her family and her village. For this and for the loss of her honor No Name Woman pays dearly. Brave Orchid uses her sad end as a warning to Kingston of the dangers of breaking old customs and traditions. Kingston is warned not to tell anyone, and No Name Woman's name is never known, because she has dishonored the family and is no longer a part of it. The father of No Name Woman's illegitimate child, however, is never punished in any way.

Kingston's story reveals the difficulties of growing up a first-generation Chinese-American. The book exposes feelings of displacement and alienation from both societies. Kingston is caught between two very different cultures with very different values, without truly belonging to either. She does not feel completely American, because she must go to Chinese school and feels her mother's pressure to conform to Chinese customs, but she does not feel completely Chinese, either. Even the parents of first-generation Chinese-Americans saw them this way: "They would not tell us children because we had been born among ghosts, were taught by ghosts, and were ourselves ghost-like. They called us a kind of ghost" (183). Thus Kingston, like so many other immigrant children, must forge an identity for herself between two worlds that do not completely accept her. She must deal with the austere customs of her Chinese heritage as well as the more liberal, lenient aspects of America. Thus, Chinese-Americans must search to find themselves and their place in society. Truly, Kingston's story is a search for her own voice and an attempt to reconcile the two disparate cultures.

It is even harder for Kingston to find her own place

because all of her knowledge of Chinese customs and the history of her family come to her second-hand. Her mother's talk-stories will haunt her dreams for years to come. Yet she also feels the need to become "American-normal." Kingston remembers walking a certain way and developing a "speaking personality" that was "American feminine" (172) in order to fit in. The complex dichotomies of the cultures pulling at Kingston will continue to affect her throughout her life: "I continue to sort out what's just my childhood, just my imagination, just my family, just the village, just movies, just living" (205). The central conflict of the book revolves around this difficulty of reconciling what Kingston has been taught throughout her life. She must struggle with the strict traditional Chinese ways that her mother is pushing on her in often cold and cruel ways. Thus the conflict that exists is mother versus daughter, and daughter versus society - both Chinese and American. Kingston must find a way to unite the two cultures and put things into the proper perspective for herself. She must find her own voice and avenge herself on the culture that is so hard on women and which imposes a silence on her. Ultimately, Kingston is able to create for herself a life that is rich in both Chinese heritage and American culture, and she is able to reconcile with her mother and find her place.

Chinese mythology plays such an important role in the lives of first-generation Chinese-Americans and their children because it is the only way that they truly learn the values and customs of their people who are so far away. Most of these Chinese-Americans have never been to China, so hearing the mythology of their culture, like the mythology of any culture, offers a glimpse into the collective psyche of the Chinese. Talk-stories are a prevalent motif in *The Woman Warrior*, with at least one in every chapter. Usually a mix of Chinese mythology and reality, these talk-stories teach lessons, customs, and serve as warnings. They are an effective way to communicate messages to the different generations, seen in the effect that they have on Kingston herself: "My mother has given me pictures to dream - nightmare babies that recur, shrinking again and again to fit in my palm" (86). Her mother's talk stories have given her fears and insecurities, bad dreams, and also inspiration. They stick with her and help her to understand the culture that they come from. In the end, Kingston is able to talk-story herself, and so she carries on the tradition.

The talk-stories of No Name Woman, Brave Orchid, and Ts'ai Yen all reveal aspects of Kingston herself. Their stories are told to illustrate the ways that they have shaped the person Kingston has become. Like No Name Woman, Kingston is a female struggling with the harsh customs of her culture. No Name Woman is portrayed as a timid woman who is cast out of her village, just as Kingston is a quiet girl who does not belong to either culture. No Name Woman represents those desperate, rebellious aspects of Kingston's personality as she fights back against the oppressive Chinese culture. To punish her village, No Name Woman kills herself and her child. To avenge herself against the Chinese culture, Kingston breaks the silence taboo and tells her story.

For all that she puts her daughter through, Brave Orchid is actually a very strong woman. Especially in contrast to Moon Orchid, she is a powerful and free-willed woman. Kingston

recognizes that her mother is a shaman, a powerful "dragon lady" whose success is shown in her ability to talk-story. Like Fa Mu Lan, she is a warrior, as when she defeats the sitting-ghost. She fights back, just as Kingston is attempting to do with her book. Also, the story of Ts'ai Yen is a metaphor for Kingston's memoir. Just as Kingston strives to be, Ts'ai Yen is a warrior and a poetess. They both bring back songs to their people from the "barbarians." Kingston takes an unintelligible culture and translates it to her readers. However, the question still remains as to which culture she is translating: American, Chinese, or Chinese-American. It seems to be all cultures at once. She is able to bring the American and Chinese cultures together, translating each one to the other.

III. CONCLUSION

In the end, Kingston is able to find her own voice and her own identity. She finds strength and independence despite the cruel oppression of the Chinese culture. She reconciles the notion of wife-slave with the stories of warriors and shaman. She redeems the woman in the talk-stories who fights back by herself becoming the female avenger, the woman warrior, who fights back against both cultures through the weapon of her writing. She is able to avoid the fine line between going crazy and being successful through her words. Kingston hangs "onto sanity by writing; [she defends herself] with words; [she] discover[s her] potential - sounds [herself] out - through articulation (Cheung 162). Kingston's writing becomes her sword and her means of finding a voice.

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