

From Silence to Speech: Women Warriors in In-between Worlds

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Yet so many stories that I write, that we all write are my mother's stories. Only recently did I fully realize this: that though years of listening to my mother's stories of her life, I have absorbed not only something of the stories themselves, but something of the manner in which she spoke, something of the urgency that involves the knowledge that her stories – like her life – must be recorded.

(Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mother's Garden* 700)

In 1975, Maxine Hong Kingston published her critically acclaimed autobiography *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood among Ghosts* which describes her experiences and struggles of growing up as a Chinese American girl in California. Apart from being a path-breaking text, Kingston's *oeuvre* may be considered a landmark not only in Chinese American literature, but also in the entire range of diasporic women's writing. Although classified and awarded as a non-fiction, it is truly a hybrid of fiction with non-fiction as it alternates often seamlessly between fantasy and reality, fact and fiction, legend and myth. Much of the book comes out of the oral tradition where stories constantly change between acts of narration. Kingston by her own confession, admits that limiting to any one genre may not be the best possible option for a creative writer as she says "I think that in every one of my books I had to create a new way of telling what I had to say...breaking through pigeon holes of fiction and non-fiction and integrating them" (Fishkin 791). Despite her publisher insisting that non-fiction was more marketable, Kingston decided to call it a "memoir" which is to a large extent autobiographical. Consisting of five chapters entitled "No Name Woman," "White Tigers," "Shaman," "At the Western Palace" and "Song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe," the text contains memoirs from Kingston's own life, written versions of her mother's stories and tellings of two famous warrior women legends, thus lying in the border zone where mythology, legend and autobiography converge and diverge, creating a true heteroglossia.

In fact through the vehicle of the Chinese talk story, which is a non-Western mode of narration, writers like Amy Tan and Kingston deconstruct stereotypical representations of Chinese women as sex objects like China doll, Suzy Wong and Madame Butterfly and redefine them through metaphors of dragons and bones. Readers of Asian American literature are familiar with Aiiiee Group's (Frank Chin and Ben Tong's) nationalist criticism of Maxine Hong Kingston and Tan's essentialist work and allege that they have feminized Asian American literature, and undervalued the power of Asian American men to combat stereo typing of the dominant white culture.

In a pattern similar to the representation of white women, stereotypes exist for Asian women too. Sandra Gilbert points out how a woman writer must examine, assimilate and transcend extreme images of “angel” and “monster” which male authors have generated for her (Gilbert and Gubar 17). The observations made by Gilbert and Gubar in the context of literary productions by 19th century Victorian women writers can also help us understand not only Asian American women writers like Maxine Hong Kingston or Amy Tan, but also an American writer of Indian origin like Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni whose fiction, *The Palace of Illusion* is a re-imagined version of the story of the Indian epic *Mahabharata*, narrated from the point of view of Princess Panchali, the wife of the legendary Pandava brothers. Like Kingston, Divakaruni also explores the genre of fictional autobiography as the immediacy, directness and artlessness of the form makes it appropriate for an “authentic feminine literary voice” (Chatterjee 139).

Rocio G Davis in an essay entitled “Asian American Autobiographical Strategies” points out how the first person narrative form blends “selfhood and writing to stress evolving subjectivities, challenge contextual authority or claim agency” (42). She also suggests that such texts often exhibit the writer’s process of self-awareness and struggle for self-representation through the narrative structure itself. The form is explored both by Kingston and Divakaruni to show how the narrators juxtapose their lives with those women in their family and community. In such writing, Davis asserts, the “writing subject” views and writes his or her story from the “prism of intersecting lives” which is also dialogic in nature. Susanna Egan uses the term “mirror talk” to describe the process in which the autobiographer is a child or partner of the biographical subject and the represented identity is shaped by the process of exploratory mirroring (quoted in Davis 45). Such reflections within the text stress the dialogic element making the relationship, rather than the individual, the essential centre. For example, *The Woman Warrior* presents both Brave Orchid’s and the child narrator Maxine’s version of the story, while Draupadi’s story is unfolded through *dai ma*’s narrative. In *The Woman Warrior*, Kingston thus blends autobiography with old Chinese folktales—talk stories transmitted from mother to daughter to acquaint her child with their history and culture. In this context I am reminded of an observation made by Michael Foucault:

It is no longer a question of saying what was done and how it was done, but of reconstructing, in and around the act, thoughts that recapitulated it, the obsessions that accompanied it, the images, desires, modulations and qualities of the pleasure that animated it. (*The History of Sexuality* 467)

One of the striking features of the reconstruction of the past is the contradictory nature of the story. The mother tells her daughter stories of other women on which to grow up, but the girl gets confused as to what lessons to draw from her mother’s story. The first story in the volume “No Name Woman” is about a Chinese immigrant’s life in the U S. The mother Brave Orchid, in order to educate her daughter about sexual relations, tells her a story about her aunt’s shameful pregnancy, but from the fragmentary bits, the author infers a different narrative of a brave feminist figure. On the surface, the maternal discourse is a family secret passed on to the daughter by the mother. However in retelling the story the daughter narrator comes to detect a warrior spirit in the supposedly

condemned aunt. In our reading of “No Name Woman” and the narrator’s reading of the aunt’s story, we find great discrepancies between the mother’s narration and the daughter’s representation of the same issue. While recollecting the aunt’s story, the mother focuses her narration more on the villager’s attack, depicting their marching towards the house, slaughter of domestic animals and the meticulous damage they caused to the family. Significantly, another salient message at the beginning and end of the story is: “You must not tell anyone.... don’t tell... Your father does not want to hear her name” (*The WW* 15). However in the entire narrative, there is no detailed description of the aunt’s narration except for one single paragraph. The reading strategy employs only the indispensable elements to achieve final aim which is the education of the daughter; the maternal inscriber is thus dictated by social necessity.

Amy Ling provides an insightful of the imaginary nature of the narrator’s story: reality is created through words and words are ripe with possibilities. Kingston delights in the richness of possibilities and in her own creativity in imagining them. The child narrator reconstructs the story in her own way; imagines that the aunt demonstrates her feminine courage in declaring love for her illicit lover and doesn’t even disclose his name, Huntley calls it a courageous act of will. No Name Aunt in fact maintains total silence through the months of her ordeal and refuses to identify the name of the father of the child, she gives birth in silence and dies in silence; - an act of deliberate will. Her name however is never mentioned in the family discourse; a deliberate way to relegate challenging behavior to silence, disappearance and ontological non-existence. If the aunt desires her name to be carved in the “family hall,” she has to be a virtuous woman meeting patriarchal expectations, the very things she lacks and regrets.

The child narrator in Kingston’s text listened to the adult’s talk story, the real punishment is not the raid, but the family’s deliberately forgetting her. Kingston solicits ancestral help tapping into the resources of familial oral stories. These stories are more generally popular, communal and empowering talk stories combining autobiography and memoir, history and mythology. Kingston’s narrator repeatedly emphasizes her inability to separate these different genres. To quote: “what is peculiar to childhood, to poverty, insanities, your mother who marked your growing years with stories, from what is Chinese, what is the Chinese tradition and what is the movies?” (*The WW* 12) It is perhaps surprising then, that the text is often praised as exotic, mysterious and Oriental. The American reviewers unfortunately did not see the American setting of the story.

“The White Tigers” is a depiction of a powerful female figure. The story and its heroine provides a stark contrast to the forgotten Chinese woman in the rest of her memoir, the No Name Aunt and Moon Orchid. In the story “At the Western Palace”, Moon Orchid travels to the US in the early 1970s to be re united with sojourning husband, a doctor now in America, whose new life, specifically his career and family, leaves no room for her. He informs Moon Orchid that she is for him “people in a book I had read a long time ago...” He further says “it’s a mistake for you to be here. You can’t belong. You don’t have the hardness for this country” (*The WW* 154). Although he had supported her financially for thirty years, he has deliberately erased him not only from life but from memory as well, which is enough to make her mad. Brave Orchid resigns herself and the three part ways never to meet again. Moon Orchid develops a paranoia for

Mexican Ghosts imagining they are after her, shuts out the outside world demanding lights turned off, windows closed and reeling in fear. The story in a way explores relationships between women as sisters, and Kingston through the powerful medium of talk story empowers the diasporic Chinese American women marginalized and subordinated by patriarchy and imperialism. Brave Orchid's talk stories to her sister Moon Orchid (encouraging her to challenge her estranged husband) is about an emperor who had four wives and ultimately the eldest wife successfully claims her space. The elder sister urges Moon Orchid to confront her husband and claim her due as his wife. For Moon Orchid thus the American Continent is a dystopic space which saps her identity. She attempts to work at the laundry and finds the heat quite challenging, fails at every work while her sister who has long relocated to America has adjusted to a hard life. As a result Moon Orchid who does not utter a word of English is left to fend for herself in the American Continent. Eventually she goes mad and dies in a mental asylum in California.

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While narrating the above story, the child narrator Maxine refers to her mother's advice: "If you are not heard, you don't exist. You become a ghost. That is why you need to talk story...to be. And To be sane, you have to be able to change your stories. Only mad men keep saying the same old story....you have to tell your story, to stop being a ghostto start being you" (*The WW* 159).

The child narrator in *The Woman Warrior* is trying to negotiate between the sane and the insane, story and reality, myth and history, fact and fiction, the said and the unsaid speech and silence. She also recalls her mother's early act of cutting her frenum, misinterpreted as an attempt to tamper with her speech: "The first thing my mother did was to cut off my tongue." (164). And though the questioned mother over and over again repeats: "I cut it so that you would not be tongue-tied." But the child narrator realizes that the act requires reporting to relieve the pain that bottles up in her throat under the pressure of prohibition and silence.

Kingston's narrative is a bildungsroman, the story of growing up of a Chinese American girl in a California laundry for whom life in the United States is a series of dualities, --- two identities, two voices and two cultures and even two names. Maxine the child narrator says

"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 jampack with homemade underwear." (*The WW* 87).

Maxine's head is stuffed with Brave Orchid's talk stories. During the daytime she banishes those tales, yet at night they haunt her,---stories of boxes of ashes next to the birth bed lest the new born is a girl, stories of babies born with defects abandoned to die

haunt her dreams---these suitcases of Chinese impossible stories haunt her dreams and are always present with her in America.

At times Maxine is the narrator but sometimes like the story in 'At the Western Palace "she slips into a third person role" representing the collision of two extremes... China in the form of Moon Orchid who is so utterly confused that she even utters such statements like "...so this is United Statesit certainly looks different from China ...I'm glad to see the Americans talk like us," (*The WW* 186) and America represented by Brave Orchid's children. Brave Orchid acts as a mediator balancing between two poles just as Maxine must learn to do.

Kingston's last story "A Song for the Barbarian Reed Pipe" ends with talk story, "the beginning is hers the ending mine" (*The WW* 206). Talk story as a conclusion is indefinite in nature simply because it in itself is indefinite as it changes with every telling. The story is partially the mother's and partially the daughter's and one cannot say what is imagined. Kingston also rewrites the ancient ballad of Mulan revisiting the heroine Fa Mulan's story. She takes the foundation of the ballad and transforms it into a radically different, much more complex story in which Fa Mulan spends years having to become a warrior, has a child, keeps the baby with her during the battle in a sling beneath her armor and allows her parents to physically carve Chinese ideographs into the skin of her back as symbols of revenge. In the end, Kingston the child narrator realizes that "the swordswoman and I are not so dissimilar.... May my people understand the resemblance soon so that I can return to them. What we have in common are the words on our back" (*The WW* 53)

The swordswoman, the woman warrior, thus provides for Kingston the title of her book. While Fa Mulan avenges her family with the sword, for Kingston, "the reporting is the vengeance, not the beheading, not the gutting, but the word" (53). Kingston in her oeuvre in fact gives voice to the voiceless, victimized wronged women. The immense dimension given to the articulation comes to the fore in the incident where the young Maxine almost brutalizes a mute girl into speech by pinching, hitting and screaming, appealing to her to "talk," "because if you don't talk, you can't have a personality. So talk, please talk" (180-181). Kingston in fact devotes the last pages of her book to the story of a historical female figure Ts'ai Yen, another historical ravished and impregnated woman who gives birth on the sand but eventually returns to her people. However the most interesting part of the story is her articulation of the pain during her captivity through articulation of poetry which she sings to the flute music of her capturers.

Thus in almost all the stories Maxine's potential words become the woman warrior Kingston's autobiography wherein she moves from silence to voice and becomes a word warrior. Kingston's narrative thus stands at the confluence of a large number of discursive traditions—mainstream feminist writing, matrilineal Asian American literature, autobiography, and non-fiction. It has been reported by the MLA as the most commonly taught text in modern University education. Used in disciplines as far reaching as American literature, Anthropology, Asian Studies, Education, Psychology, Sociology and Women's Studies, Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* has great interpretative

possibilities and readers of different persuasion may see in the text what they desire or expect to see.

Our engagement with literature is incomplete if we cannot relate it to contemporary reality. As we read Kingston's text we realize that it remains an exemplary one as we have women warriors all around us who have long been suppressed and silenced and have at long last arrived from silence to voice. I'm here reminded of the ordeals of Nirbhaya, the warrior woman (a victim of gang rape in a Delhi bus) who fought till her last breath resisting assault on her body and mind. Her name had not been disclosed initially as the name of rape victims are kept under wraps like the No Name Woman in *The Woman Warrior*. But the victim's mother disclosed her identity in a public ceremony in December 2015, honouring her, and proudly declare that she is Jyoti Singh, insisting that a rape victim is not a No Name Woman, her identity should not be hidden, and perpetrators of crime should hide their names and conceal their identities.

In literature, as in life, the woman warrior still struggles to find her voice and just as myths oppress women denying them voice, visibility or dignity, the same continues in life too. One is here reminded of John Berger's observations in the context of European art that while a man's presence suggests what he can do, a woman's presence suggests what can be done to her. Thus decentering and disturbing patriarchal myths can be a truly emancipatory exercise as Kingston says in response to Sinologist's criticism of distortion of myths: "[Myths] have to change, be useful or be forgotten.... The myths I write are new" (Kingston, 24).

In the new myth that she writes, Kingston establishes the association between voicelessness and victimization by giving voice to wronged women. The ordeal of women continues and it is for the writers and poets to give words to their mouth and break their silences. The journey from silence to speech will then be truly worthwhile.

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