

QUEST FOR IDENTITY IN MAXINE HONG KINGSTON'S THE WOMAN
WARRIOR: MEMOIRS OF A GIRLHOOD AMONG GHOSTS

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Abstract:

In the recent past we have seen the growth of many genres and literatures in the tradition of American mainstream literature, like Asian American literature, Japanese American literature, Chinese American literature etc. The focus of all these literatures is to assert their identity in the multicultural America. They want to be part of the mainstream American literature, without losing their own cultural baggage which they carry from the country of their origin. Maxine Hong Kingston is a Chinese American writer who has written extensively on the theme of identity, both racial as well as gender. She believes that women of colour are doubly marginalised. They are not only suppressed by the American white men and women but also by the male dominated society of their own country.

Key Words: Chinese American, Feminism, Gender, Identity, Race & Women's Literature

Introduction:

Feminism is a major theme in most of women's literature these days. In the past, even the term "women's literature" was unknown and if it was known, it was not considered important. Feminist critics have long recognised that what constitutes female experience is not biological gender or a specific female psyche but the constraints and limitations felt by women as a result of the cultural constitution of gender and the phallogocentric organisation of society. To write socially and politically as a woman is, therefore, to question the true status and ostensible ideological neutrality of cultural norms and institutions. What is politically important for women and racial minorities is not to frame correct definitions of female and ethnic identity but to question all such definitions. Above all it means to reject the concept of a stable and autonomous self upon which such definitions depend. Since Maxine Kingston came into the American literary arena in 1976, her writing has successfully gained its way into the mainstream of American literature and firmly established her position as a major American writer. She has been able to create a mixed genre of her own invention, bespeaking her mixed experiences with two cultural traditions. She has developed a Chinese-American literary dialect from book to book, adding to the multicultural tradition of American literature. She not only claims America for Chinese Americans through her writing, she also gives voice to a Chinese American culture within the mainstream of American literature. It is through the act of writing itself that she has established her selfhood as an American, a Chinese American, a woman and a writer.

Her first book *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts* is a collection of memoirs of Kingston's experience of growing up in an immigrant family in Stockton, California. Kingston reveals the squalor and poverty of Chinatowns, the endemic racism, the traumas of acculturation in a hostile environment and her own attempt to subvert gender hierarchies by imaginative identification with the woman warrior. In other words, we can say that, it is a quest for personal and gender identity, which is embodied in her struggle for voice. Her journey from silence to song vividly portrays her difficult struggle and final triumph.

Kingston writes page after page about herself and her female relatives in an effort to find voice and define identity. By virtue of Kingston's identity as a Chinese American woman, her quest encompasses another dimension — defining gender identity as well as national identity. She has to assert herself both as a woman and as an American. It is the quest for identity, the struggle for assimilation, the fight for the right to belong, which are continued in other works as well.

The Woman Warrior is divided into five chapters or to be more precise five linked stories. Each story focuses on a female character who serves as a representative of the book's narrator. All these stories are linked by the unmistakable narrative voice of Kingston, who recalls events from her childhood and the tales that her mother, Brave Orchid, told her. It is through these stories of herself and the other female relatives that Kingston records her difficult yet triumphant journey from voiceless to voiced.

The first story titled, *No Name Woman*, opens with Brave Orchid's warning to her teenage daughter Maxine Kingston. It begins with the words;

"You must not tell anyone", she said, "What I am going 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. (5)

It is a tale of her nameless aunt, a woman engulfed by defeating silence, who is deliberately forgotten by the family as a humiliation. Here Kingston draws a parallel to her aunt who was rebellious in breaching the community code by her adultery, whatever the reason. She rebelled silently, never revealed the man's name; and suffered silently as she never begged for mercy. The author is rebellious too, by showing sympathy and understanding towards this nameless aunt who was deprived, denounced, and deliberately forgotten by the family, by regarding this family outcast as her forerunner by breaking the punitive and obliterating silence around her; by devoting pages to her and thereby making her immortal for all the times to come. In the words of Kingston, "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" (8).

No Name Woman is thus the author's first triumphant effort in breaking the silence of her life. Likewise Kingston also describes the silence of Chinese immigrants in the United States. She writes about people who have been deliberately neglected by the mainstream society over a long period of time due to socio-political factors. In addition, silence particularly signifies female

victimization, which is closely connected to the oppression of Chinese women in the old Chinese culture and also in modern American society.

The next story, *White Tigers* introduces the main symbolic figure of the book—the warrior woman. In this tale, also told by her mother, Kingston learns that there are possibilities open to her as a woman that she had not considered. Here Kingston recollects how as a girl she had trailed her mother around the house and singing about Fa Mu Lan, the great woman warrior who fought graciously against the feudal lords and returned alive to settle in her village.

We find that Brave Orchid has taught her young daughter the song of Fa Mu Lan that stimulates the grown artists elaborate fantasy of another young girl's becoming a victorious female avenger of crimes against her village. Through her retelling of the tale, Kingston, in addition to questioning gender, also recreates the role of avenger for her purpose. She needs to be the female avenger and the avenger of the family. Thus the warrior woman out in the battle avenges not only the wrongs to her village but the hierarchical genderizing she has been subjected to. Kingston also like the Fa Mu Lan wants to avenge the hardships of her family, the loss of laundry in the process of urbanisation and the pervasive racism to which the Chinese are subjected. The book's third section, *Shaman*, tells the story of Kingston's mother, Brave Orchid's life in China while she waited for her husband to earn enough money to bring her to America. Here we find Brave Orchid is a strong personality. She receives good medical education in China. She cures the sick, and is known to be a Shaman. But when she follows her husband to America, she has to work in the laundry that he owns. There also she is strong enough to support and help her husband and can be viewed as a counterpart of Fa Mu Lan. Kingston is happy that her mother does not change her name even after coming to America, "Even when she emigrated, my mother kept Brave Orchid, adding no American name nor holding one in reserve for American emergencies" (78). Here Kingston is of the view that her mother did not come under the influence of Americanisation and thereby was rooted to China.

In the fourth story, *At the Western Place*, we learn that if Brave Orchid had the strength to survive both in China and America, her sister, Moon Orchid was not as lucky. She is another female victim in the novel. Moon Orchid moves to America from Hong Kong to look for her husband, who left China 30 years ago. Although he is not a totally irresponsible husband, she has been receiving money from him for 30 long years. But he has no intention to take her to America, not even after he has established a successful career as a doctor in the US. Moon Orchid is silent. She has never revealed to him her wish to come to the US, as she waited for him to suggest it, but he never did. After years of goading from Brave Orchid, Moon Orchid came to America to reclaim her husband, but after being rejected by him, she is not able to adapt to America and gradually goes mad. For Kingston, the traits of the traditional Chinese woman, feminine and unassertive were useless, she would have to be strong and brave like her mother to survive in the United States.

From her two aunts' (No Name Woman and Moon Orchid) tragic lives, Kingston is aware that a woman is doomed to be a victim if she is dependent. Only by bringing her fate under her own control she can manage to claim her rights and live with dignity. For Kingston, both of her aunts meet this fate because they were not articulate enough to voice their feelings, and thereby were voiceless. By writing about these two aunts, Kingston tries to give voice to them. The author's fight with voicelessness reaches its climax in the scene in which the narrator confronted another Chinese girl who could not talk. She tried various ways, both hard and gentle, to make the girl talk. But she elicited only quarts of tears but no words from the quiet girl. Kingston warned the girl that if she does not talk, she will have no personality. This effort on the part of Kingston reflects her arduous struggle to find her own voice, for the dumb girl embodied everything she hated in herself. It vividly conveys to us the humiliation, the pain, the frustration Kingston underwent in the struggle for voice.

If No Name Woman is punished by the feudal system of China, Moon Orchid is punished by the contemporary American culture. And both these events seem to carry the same message to the narrator that nobody can speak for her but her own self. To save herself, she had to break the silence, rather than to wait till she gets a chance like her aunt Moon Orchid.

Kingston's fifth story titled, *A Song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe* concludes her memoir with the parable of Ts'ai Yen, the Han dynasty poetess who has been taken captive by the barbarian nomads. She was made the wife of their chieftain and spent 12 years among the barbarians. Nobody spoke or understood her language, including her own children, who insensitively laughed at her attempt to teach them Chinese. Her own voice was silenced and her own language obliterated by the barbarians. So she sings to the music of reeds of these barbarians. Although she sang in Chinese but the barbarians understood her anger and sadness. Even her children eventually sang along with her.

In recounting the life story of Ts'ai Yen, whose battle of self-expression culminated in songful victory, Kingston retells her own story and celebrates herself. This triumphant song of becoming a woman and a warrior is the climax of the autobiography. Like Ts'ai Yen, Kingston has yearned for voice and has learned to vocalize. She too has translated the sadness and anger of her life among ghosts into an autobiography or a self that speaks eloquently to us. She too has become a Woman and a Warrior.

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