

Interpreting Silence and Voice in Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*

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Abstract: *The Woman Warrior* mainly revolves around the narrator's experience of "silence" and "voice" as a Chinese American woman, which reflects Kingston's real experience in the process of growing up in pain and confusion, and it can also be said that it is a process in which she seeks her own cultural identity and the position for Chinese American women to settle down in American society. In analyzing Kingston's memoir, this paper is concerned with how silence is enforced upon the female characters and how Kingston gives her own voice, and finally reconciles her Chinese and American identities as a Chinese American.

Keywords: Chinese American, silence, identity, voice

1. Introduction

Possessing the power to speak is the essential first step toward self-assertion and identity fulfillment. In other words, it is impossible to build identity without being heard. Chinese American women, as ethnic minorities in the US, are deprived of the right to assert themselves with confidence. As a female Chinese American, Maxine Hong Kingston struggles to be a silence-breaker, a woman warrior with her own loud and clear voice. Her famous work *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts* is Kingston's first success in the literary world and has been introduced as part of literature curricula in many American universities. Through the use of the Chinese tradition of talk-story and her own first-person view as a Chinese American, this fictional autobiography contributes to the formation of Chinese American culture. For someone like Kingston, who is exposed to two different cultures at the same time, the process of growing up is full of pain and confusion. Since her understanding of Chinese culture is limited to the stories told by her mother, it is difficult for her to separate reality and imagination, reality and reality. It is even more difficult to understand the essence of oriental culture with the western way of thinking. In the novel, Kingston shakes the sexism of Chinese society and the racist system of American society by telling the stories of 5 women who have an important influence on her life.

2. The Imposed Silence

Kingston begins *The Woman Warrior* with the story of her aunt, a nameless woman committing suicide in silence, and concludes her memoir with the legend of Ts'ai Yen, a female poet who gives a voice to silence. Firstly, silence suppresses the narrator's no-name aunt who was punished for having an adulterous affair. Such transgressions could not be tolerated by the villagers and the patriarchal community is resolute in shaming and punishing the women who do not follow certain rules and have no voice to defend themselves as they are not taken into account. The aunt commits herself by plunging into the village well after the villagers loot her family's home. The event presented by the narrator's mother is meant to show her that such a shame would be unacceptable for her family and she should be careful never to let such a thing happen. To avoid shame, Maxine's family seeks to remove all traces of her dead aunt, living "as if she had never been born" (Kingston 3). Expunging her name and erasing her life's memory is arguably the cruelest punishment her family could design. The silence of the living is severely harsh as a name is essential to human identity, and no name means no identity. In a haunting memory of her aunt's story, the narrator tries to persuade a shy Chinese American girl to speak by scolding and pinching her. "If you don't talk, you can't have a personality. . . Talk, please talk," Maxine shouts out. She enforces silence in the same breath: "Don't you dare tell anyone I've been bad to you" (210). Maxine's irritation with the mute child is a reflection of her own anxiety about erasing her identity, much as her no-name aunt has been expunged by silence.

Maxine also has a living aunt, Moon Orchid, a sister of the narrator's mother, who comes from Hong Kong to regain the heart of her long-emigrated and now re-married husband in America, where her "spirit" finds no "place to come back to" (157). Educated by Confucian thoughts, Moon Orchid is typically passive and quiet. She totally follows the Three Obediences and the Four Virtues of Confucian philosophy. Suffering silently, she asks little from her husband and is easily satisfied. Moon Orchid is almost certainly married to her husband by family arrangement. Her husband has gone to America for over thirty years and has never come back. Moon Orchid dutifully submits to her husband and since her husband has never mentioned reuniting with her, she dares not to ask her husband to send her to America; she just waits patiently for over thirty years, without knowing that her husband has already married again in America. After Brave Orchid tells her that her husband has married again, Moon Orchid even imagines that she can live peacefully with her husband and his new wife. Taught by the patriarchal thoughts in China, Moon Orchid does not mind her husband's second marriage, which is a common phenomenon in old China. When Moon Orchid is over sixty, she finally accepts her sister Brave Orchid's suggestion to come to America to claim her husband. Facing her savagely looking husband, Moon Orchid is thoroughly scared. She was limited to simply opening and closing her mouth without letting any words out. She backed away from his glare. She sighs, but her husband's sarcastic reprimand silences her sobbing. When her husband rejects her, she feels as if she has lost her basis for existence. She has lost her status as the first wife and is overcome with a sense of inner shame. She begins to speak in a dull, monotonous voice, becomes afraid not only for herself but for all her family members, and cries when someone leaves the house as if she were seeing him or her for the last time. The silence of Moon Orchid before her husband suggests her fear of and submissiveness to him. It also shows the internalization of Confucian ideology, which advocates the wife's absolute subordination to her husband. As Braithwaite observes, when there is a recognized and unequal distribution of power among the players in a social context, silence as a communicative action is connected with such circumstances (324). In feudal marriage, men always control the power while women can only obey their orders. Moon Orchid goes insane after being stared at and terrified into silence by her husband. In this regard, silence can be seen as a symbol and reflection of female victimization in a patriarchal society.

3. The need to Talk

Associating voicelessness with victimization and madness, Kingston understands the need for expression. She transforms the forgotten no-name woman into a figure of tenacity in *The Woman Warrior*, drawing courage from her ghostly aunt. King-Kok Cheung suggests, in one made-up variation, that the aunt is a seducer rather than a rape victim. She is Maxine's predecessor in that she is a rebel and a breaker of rules (167). Kingston gains the courage to break down her own barriers by portraying her aunt as someone who defies convention. She begins her own story by violating her mother's orders, as Cheung correctly points out. She protests and denounces the Chinese tradition's misogyny, stopping her part in the punishment by recalling the adulteress' past experiences. The narrator worships her aunt in an original and novel way after being exposed to and inspired by American values and traditions: "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 origami into houses and clothes" (Kingston 16). In this episode, Kingston shows the unchanging Chinese tradition of ancestor worship, which includes dedicating paper money, clothes, automobiles, and other items, as well as lighting incense and providing meals. The narrator, on the other hand, transforms this core quality by giving it a new shape. She devotes "pages of paper to her, though not origami into houses and houses", but written paper, a written narrative of her aunt's experiences. As a result, an oriental tradition takes on a new life in America, becoming neither Chinese nor American, but rather a Chinese American cultural manifestation.

Kingston discovers her own voice in *The Woman Warrior* by becoming an expert at talk-story and speaking. *The Woman Warrior* makes it clear that Kingston's transition from silence to the song was via her experiences with practicing speech detailed in the memoir. The torture Kingston inflicts on the Quiet Girl in the restroom is one such instance: "'Why won't you talk?' I started to cry... 'You don't see I'm trying to help you out, do you?...I'm doing this for your own goods'" (180-181). Her insult at another silent schoolgirl is essentially the self-directed caution of a youngster scared by a dismal expanse of increasing quiet, Linda Morante argues (78). Kingston abuses the Quiet Girl in her early attempts to find her own voice and break out from the quiet in order to fight against the injustices imposed on her by society and her family. Martin Danahay remarks that because quiet is associated with victimization, Kingston is afraid of it. Her attempt to get the other girl to talk is an effort to stop being victimized and to make the other girl into a victim. (72). Instead of attempting to victimize the Quiet Girl, Kingston is likely seeking to escape the constraints of her own society. This is why, at that moment, she becomes

overwhelmed with emotion since she is speaking more to herself than to the Quiet Girl. Kingston's narrative serves as both proof of her proficiency in talk-story writing and a means for her to break the quiet.

Brave Orchid, an independent woman who becomes a doctor in China before coming to the United States, a Chinese woman who insists on using her maiden name in both China and America, a strong-willed woman who bore six children in her later years and spent fifteen-hour days running the laundry is also seen as a woman warrior by her daughter. Although still embedded in traditional Confucian values, Brave Orchid establishes herself as a dragoness in Chinese patriarchal society. After her husband goes away to America, she actively seeks to become a professional woman by enrolling herself in the To Keung School of Midwifery with the money sent by her emigrant husband. It is indeed a brave and farseeing step taken by a woman who is already forty years old and has never been elsewhere other than the households of her father and her husband. At school, Brave Orchid enjoys a life full of independence. "Free from family", she realizes "the daydream of women—to have a room, even a section of a room" of their own and a carefree life...without servitude" (Kingston 72-73). She also starts friendships with other women at school and they fight against the "sitting ghost" by their communal effort. The woman-to-woman friendship empowers women in the face of patriarchal oppression and it poses a real challenge to the patriarchal hierarchy. Furthermore, by telling her daughter the family's secret that is forbidden to tell anyone, Brave Orchid breaks the patriarchal injunction of silence and indirectly gives voice to the silenced no-name woman. Furthermore, she consciously seeks to empower her daughter by telling her the story of Fa Mulan.

4. Communication and Self-expression

To facilitate the process of breaking silence, Kingston merges with the legendary warrior, Fa Mulan, with the purpose of asserting her identity as a distinctively Chinese American. The story of Fa Mulan has circulated among people for a long time in ancient China, depicting Fa Mulan disguised in a male dress, replacing her father to join in the war. Determined to counter the unfair world with sexism and racism, Kingston recreates the image of Fu Mulan subverting the traditional image of women and ending women with a new connotation. In her creative rewriting of myths, Kingston violates conventional gender norms by embellishing her female warrior with masculine heroic stories, as Amy Ling observes (158). At the same time, Kingston borrows from the legend of Yue Fei, a historical hero who was remembered by the four Chinese characters on his back carved by his mother — "Report Loyalty to the Country." By having her swordswoman bear the report of the crime on her back waiting to be told out, Kingston also accepts Yue Fei's spirit of uprightness, loyalty, and bravery.

Mulan does not symbolize the mythical character of Chinese history in *The Woman Warrior*; rather, she stands in for the author and the narrator, the fighters who battle bigotry in both China and the United States. To defeat these foes, they must hone their verbal combat skills rather than their military prowess. In actuality, Kingston uses the reconstruction of myths to try to understand how her rich oriental lineage connects to her American existence. The narrator's goal is to develop her own voice and establish her cultural identity via this endeavor. Therefore, Mulan's war is not against a real and foreign invader; rather, she must combat an internal threat, namely, the threat of losing her identity. When the narrator wakes up from imagination realizing the impossibility of physical revenge within the American reality, she turns to language. As Kingston says, "What we have in common are the words at our backs" (53). She realizes that as a female writer, she actually has something in common with the female warrior—the female warrior uses the sword as a weapon to avenge her family and villagers while she uses language as a weapon to lead Chinese Americans to fight against racial discrimination and establish their own identity and status.

Kingston ultimately transforms from a quiet listener to a talker of stories to sing her own voice, having changed the military warrior into a verbal fighter. *The Woman Warrior* concludes with a story of another woman warrior—a speaking woman—introduced by the mother and completed by the daughter. Not like Maxine's unnamed adulterous aunt who gives silent birth and drowns herself and her baby silently, Ts'ai Yen sings "A Song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe", which symbolizes a process from silence to articulation, from the cultural voiceless of the Chinese American immigrants to their claim for Chinese cultural identity and reintegration. Ts'ai Yen is a female poet who was born around 175 AD. as the daughter of a prominent scholar. Captured by nomadic people of the Southern Hsiungnu at the age of twenty, she serves as a captive soldier for the chieftain throughout her twelve years of captivity and gives birth to two children. After being captured by nomadic people, although Ts'ai Yen is in a foreign country, she doesn't abandon herself and get lost, but sticks to the Chinese language and cultural traditions in silence and

finally sings her own song. Ts'ai Yen's sad and resentful song is another kind of "revenge": breaking the silence and reporting the painful experience of the Han nationality to the world with her song. This also symbolizes the author's "revenge": breaking the silence of Chinese Americans for many years and reporting the experiences of Chinese in America to the world in words. Ts'ai Yen's story can be regarded as Kingston's final solution to the dilemma and problems encountered in her life—the reconciliation between parents and children, and between different cultures. By merging the Chinese tradition with American cultural values, Kingston finally breaks the silence and follows Ts'ai Yen's example, singing the unique song of Chinese American women.

Kingston's success is directly related to her greatest challenge, which is communication. The author ultimately discovers a means to cope with her anguish via the use of language, recording the contradictions and contradictory ideals. Kingston redeems herself in *The Woman Warrior* by condemning the horrors of American racism and Chinese sexism. She ultimately communicates ideas in such a unique way and tells the narrative so delicately that the book was a huge hit and brought the author several honors. and patriarchy, Chinese culture and American culture. As a second-generation Chinese American, Maxine is at the center of all those conflicts. On one hand, she is confused by her mother's inculcation of Chinese ethics, which are out of joint with her American experience; on the other hand, she is irritated by the racial discrimination on Chinese in America. She is an outsider twice over and lives in between worlds. In order to break away from the dilemma, Maxine begins to break silence and to articulate her own voice. By the revision of her mother's stories, Maxine actually puts herself in an equal position of dialoguing with her mother. Through the dialogue between mother and daughter, Maxine finally understands her mother and re-identifies their relationship. Through the reconstruction of Fa Mulan's story, Maxine fights against the patriarchy in old China and suggests that male and female should live harmoniously by dialoguing with each other. By putting Chinese culture and American culture in a dialogic position, Maxine at last realizes that the two cultures should emphasize dialogue instead of opposition so as to establish a more harmonious atmosphere.

5. Conclusion

Being both an insider and outsider to Western and Eastern cultures, Kingston records her own struggle for the pursuit of identity and self-expression as a Chinese American woman, who is deeply mired in Chinese and American cultural dilemmas. On the one hand, she can't agree with the traditional values and codes of conduct in Chinese society—the gender pressure in Chinatown, and the tradition of preferring boys to girls. On the other hand, as a discriminated Chinese, she can't be completely equal to Americans and she is a marginal person outside the mainstream society. After confusion, pain, and struggle, Kingston finds that she is neither a pure Chinese nor a typical American, but a unique Chinese American. She continually queries and seeks the most accurate translations of certain language and cultural practices, creating a continuing conversation between the discourses of her parents, culture and those currently prevalent in the United States. In brief, the memoirs are structured on two major figures of woman: the warrior, resisting both Chinese and U.S. oppressive cultures; and the story-teller, who fashions writing out of the mother's talk-stories. The two figures undermine and reinforce each other, forming a repeated self-reflexive narrative pattern. In talking Chinese stories, or transforming and displacing Fa Mu Lan's story, Kingston in effect accomplishes her cultural mission of converting the gender and race hurt into the hope of Chinese American immigrants. The song of Ts'ai Yen at the end of the book is a sign of Maxine Hong Kingston's reconciliation of the Chinese and the mainstream cultural reintegration.

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