

The Icfai University  
Journal of

# ENGLISH STUDIES



The Icfai University Press  
[www.iupindia.org](http://www.iupindia.org)

- Shelley's Orientalia:  
Indian Elements in His Poetry** 7  
*Jalal Uddin Khan*
- Critiquing Indian English Literature  
as New National Literature** 24  
*Bijay Kumar Das*
- Wetware Fiction: Cyberpunk  
and the Ideologies of Posthuman Bodies** 30  
*Pramod K Nayar*
- Narrative Discourses on *Purdah*  
in the Subcontinent** 41  
*Asha S*
- R K Narayan's 'New Woman':  
A Feminist Perspective** 52  
*Satyasree Y*
- The Paradox of Cultural Globalization:  
Deterritorialization or Reterritorialization?** 63  
*Lily Want*
- Myth: A Linguistic Narrative  
in Maxine Hong Kingston** 69  
*Tessy Anthony C*
- Deconstructing Authority in Dario Fo's  
*Accidental Death of an Anarchist*** 76  
*Srirupa Chatterjee*

# Myth: A Linguistic Narrative in Maxine Hong Kingston

Tessy Anthony C\*

A narrative is generally in verse or in prose. But within this, there can be an implicit literary narrative – the myth. Maxine Hong Kingston, living in multicultural America, makes use of the myth of the woman warrior to reveal her changing consciousness. Myths originated far back in the culture of oral societies. They moved from a silent existence to an oral form, and later to a written form to avoid erasure. Kingston's attitudes crystallize as a part of growth and maturation. A pointer to this is her use of the woman warrior myth. This is an archetype, and a verbal and visual sign. The woman warrior, Kingston, has become a word warrior, advocating peace. In *The Fifth Book of Peace*, she rewrites herself as a peace activist. It records her growth and individuation. She preserves her ethnicity using a Chinese myth as a tool to facilitate a new bicultural identity. This myth is re-modelled and repositioned. Kingston becomes a pacifist, advocating a global human community through artistic means. Myth is a language and a narrative which communicates very effectively. Through the narrative of the myth, Kingston consciously implies that nationality can transcend boundaries. Her cultural hybridity results in a plural consciousness, making her advocate one nation.

The warrior woman, Kingston, in *The Fifth Book of Peace* (2004), advocates through a Chinese myth narrative, how globalization and hybridity alter one's perspective. It must be understood that at a time when globalization implies standardization, preserving ethnicity is an inherent act of resisting globalization. Not being accepted in America as an American, yet labeling herself as a Chinese American, Kingston preserves her Chinese ethos, simultaneously advocating peace through it. Through artistic and pacifist means, she advocates a global human community. She explores the conscience of the world of the after-effects of war, all the same, consciously implying that nationality can transcend boundaries.

In the domain of narratives, there are myths, and myths themselves are narratives. According to *A Dictionary of Literary Terms*, a narrative is "a story, tale or recital of facts. ... To create a narrative, or narrate a story is therefore to recount, and establish some connection between a series of events" (Gray, 1984, p. 133). And this is what a myth does. It narrates a series of events through verbal and visual signs. The woman

---

\* Lecturer in English (Selection Grade), St. Teresa's College, Cochin, Kerala, India.  
E-mail: tessy.antony@gmail.com

warrior myth is reworked to transcend its local moorings. It is a liberation story. Kingston gives this myth a context-transcending cutting edge. In *The Fifth Book of Peace*, Kingston reveals her change in the belief that world community, and not national community, is to be striven for. Only an artist like her can prevent a war by challenging the conscience of the people through the powerful use of language. What started out in *The Woman Warrior* (1984) as a story of feminism and liberation from the crippling norms of Chinese life, ended in *The Fifth Book of Peace* with Kingston advocating peace through the language of an ethnic myth. So, a cultural myth has been altered and invested with global significance. Myth is a linguistic element, by means of which a culture and an identity are asserted. The identity asserted here is that of a hybrid Chinese American.

Though America upholds multiculturalism, Americanization is an attempt at standardization. While the white American community has emerged as a dominant culture, the ethnic identities remain as minorities. So, the desire for monopoly and erasure of cultures into a single homogeneous one is a major motive of white America. Kingston is conscious of this attempt of the first world to erase Chinese Americans. Hence, Kingston preserves ethnicity through myth, as a counter action to first world hegemony. Transforming a myth transfers cultures, values and belief systems. Kingston dexterously infiltrates American language by repositioning the warrior woman myth, which, once localized, is given a global coloring—retaining ethnicity, yet advocating peace.

The dominant myth in Maxine Hong Kingston is that of Fa Mu Lan, the woman warrior. Fa Mu Lan is a young Chinese girl who disguises herself as a soldier and fights for her people. She avenges the wrongs done to her family and village by killing the baron and the emperor. In those times in China, a young girl was not supposed to join the army, and if found out, she could be excommunicated. Since she has disguised herself as a soldier, her army of men do not know that they are being led by a woman. Except her, women in China play a very secondary role, and the very word 'woman' implies wife and slave. This myth of Fa Mu Lan recurs in two of Kingston's works, in the first and the most recent one. Her first book, *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts* is a liberating story and *The Fifth Book of Peace* is a homecoming narrative. Kingston grows up in a story-telling atmosphere. Myths stem from the Chinese oral traditions. Kingston's mother Brave Orchid is a champion talker, and through her talks, Kingston's narratives unfold.

Kingston brings out the first version of *The Woman Warrior* with the title "The Gold Mountain Stories". But the publishers re-titled the work as *The Woman Warrior*, since the woman warrior is a strong metaphor running throughout the novel. Kingston herself looks for an inspirational figure, an archetype of a woman, from amidst Chinese myth, who has 'masculine powers' (Skenazy and Martin, 1998, p. 131) to continue and rebuild the myth, so that women could take credit for all that she did. One notices that Kingston's works begin with the Fa Mu Lan legend of a woman warrior and evolve into a tale of a soldier becoming feminine, advocating peace in times of war.

Mass culture is not just American or English. It is all this and more, communicating central ideas by resorting to myths, because myth is a language. According to Roland Barthes, "... men do not have with a myth a relationship based on truth but on use: they

depoliticize according to their needs" (Barthes, 2000, p. 144). Through a myth, a message is communicated, and through a silent existence it reaches an oral stage. Barthes observes that "myth is a type of speech" (p. 109). It is a verbal or visual speech that communicates to its readers. Ethnic writers include myths from their own culture to enrich English by introducing new myths or by awakening us to the realization of similar myths in other cultures too.

Myths are altered according to convenience. Kingston combines the story of a military general on whose back, words are carved: "I guess as a minority person in America, and with a lot of perceptions that English is not my language, there is a lot of leaving me out of this culture. So a lot of my work is appropriation. I'm going to appropriate ... this language" (Skenazy and Martin, 1998, p. 144). She uses working myths that are retailored for an American audience. America was fascinated by the mysticism of the East. So, Kingston combines the myth of the lone ranger on horseback with Fa Mu Lan, who goes to battle wearing male attire and is proficient in martial arts. She establishes a new set of relationships based on equality and individual fulfillment. She gives an alternative version of the traditional Fa Mu Lan to please the American enchantment for the new. David Leiwei Li, in "The Naming of a Chinese American 'I': Cross-cultural Significations in *The Woman Warrior*", says: "Kingston's marriage of the Kung Fu and the Western in her myths is no accident: she is enunciating the power and toughness of her gender to partake of any endeavour she is enunciating the power and toughness of her gender to partake of any endeavour her male correspondent is capable of" (Li, 1988, p. 507). Kingston uses this myth to communicate a message, moving from national to global consciousness.

In *The Fifth Book of Peace*, Kingston depicts the experiences of war veterans. "Wars have terrible consequences for all kinds of people: people who were in prison camps, people who watched their families die in front of them. Surely these people are also veterans! And then most wonderfully, the definition expanded to peace veterans: people who were in the streets, who were in demonstrations, who were in riots and people who went to jail because they refused the draft. We all began to see that they were also veterans of war" (Skenazy and Martin, 1998, p. 226). One good idea that came out of the Vietnam war is 'raised consciousness', the idea that war is bad, and there is no winning. The world has begun to question war (Kingston, 2004, p. 272). By writing "you make history" (Kingston, 2004, p. 266), Kingston reasons how and why a war is not to be waged. She shows that a woman can play a significant role in not having a war. Her book emerges from her discussions with war veterans, especially from Vietnam. Among the letters received, one says: "Yes women are sanctuary" (Kingston, 2004, pp. 247-48). In *The Woman Warrior*, Kingston leaves the ending out since she did not want to diffuse the idea of women (Skenazy and Martin, 1998, p. 132). Fa Mu Lan leads her army home and reveals that she is a woman. But, in *The Fifth Book of Peace*, Kingston mentions that Fa Mu Lan reveals to her soldiers that they were led by a woman to show them that a woman is capable of everything (Skenazy and Martin, 1998, p. 132). Kingston says: "I want to make the world a more peaceful place. I want to help prevent wars ... I want to change the world through artistic pacifist means (Skenazy and Martin, 1998, p. 168). "An artist changes the world by changing consciousness and changing the atmosphere by

means of language” (Skenazy and Martin, 1998, p. 169). She invents the reasons for peace using her woman warrior myth. Some of Kingston’s reasons for advocating peace are occasioned by the war against Iraq, the Oakland Beverley fire of 1991, the three books of peace, and her exposure to Coadaism and Buddhism. Kingston’s ideas mainly spring from the Vietnam American war. In *The Fifth Book of Peace*, she describes how, in sanctuary, they were living in a community in peace. It was a product of the Vietnam American war. In *The Warrior Woman*, she blended well a liberation story and a war story. Her book is prescribed for the US Air Force in Colorado to revive the spirit of struggle and to overcome difficulties in emerging victorious. But in *The Fifth Book of Peace*, the myth is understood as a homecoming story, highlighting peace.

Having gone through life’s toughest experiences, Kingston becomes an advocate of world peace. In ancient Chinese mythology there were three books of peace and they were burned—in wars, or fires, or book banning. Even Kingston lost her novel in progress in the Oakland Beverley fire of 1991. Two of her brothers were in the US Air Force during the Vietnam War. She was scared that her own son would be drafted in the war. She and her family had suffered immensely. “You need to suffer in order to learn from your suffering” (Kingston, 2004, p. 384). Kingston puts the spotlight on “... the enormous influence of American culture, that really do cause a lot of suffering throughout the world ...” (Kingston, 2004, p. 384). She says that if one is aware of this, one can alleviate suffering. “... whereas she [Fa Mu Lan] comes back and she becomes a soft human being again. She is not brutalized by war” (Skenazy and Martin, 1998, p. 176). “No war” does not alone mean “peace”. Peace, to many, is dull and undramatic. “We don’t understand the joy that is peace” (Skenazy and Martin, 1998, p. 176). Fighting for peace is a recognition of injustices. Denouncing American war policies, Kingston tells Donna Perry, “I am looking for a language of peace. I am trying to rewrite a book of peace” (Skenazy and Martin, 1998, p. 184).

According to the Chinese belief system, the god of war and the god of literature go together. Kingston says that the Chinese god of war advocates peace at all times but one can go to war when all other methods fail:

To this day in China towns everywhere in the world, there are statues of Gwang Goong, god of war and literature. Usually he is astride his red horse, but often he’s reading a book. Finally knowing to ask, What book is that?, I found that Gwang Goong is reading Sun Tzu’s *The Art of War* (Kingston, 2004, p. 49).

The god of war is looking for a way to avoid war and retain peace. Kingston herself advocates peace for all men, but as a writer, she takes the pen and writes a peace language from a tolerant Chinese American perspective. She changes the conscience of people through language, which should be a nonviolent communication. Using English and myth, she has avoided erasure and has erased certain wrong notions about Chinese Americans.

Kingston writes a peace language. She uses language as a tool to write back to the centre. She says “I’m going to rewrite” (Skenazy and Martin, 1998, p. 174), and this is

what she does, but finally from a hybrid's perspective. But again, this is a continuation of every endeavor. It is a struggle to break through taboos to find one's voice. Asian Americans are cultural ambassadors. If war veterans could write about post-traumatic stress to write about peace after going through war, then this wisdom emerges from a war veteran who thinks globally and wishes to become a part of a world community, retaining her ethnicity. Kingston says, "... an artist changes the world by changing consciousness and changing the atmosphere by means of language. So I have to use and invent a beautiful, human artistic language of peace" (Skenazy and Martin, 1998, pp. 168-169). She gives a Chinese ethnic value, which is particular to a social culture, a global significance. This ethnicity permeates through differences in *The Fifth Book of Peace*, where she advocates a peace language. She tries to advocate non-violence as a means to enlarge the area of understanding between different ethnic groups. But this idea stems from the three lost Chinese books of peace. European immigrants into the US tend to lose their ethnicity quite fast, within two or three generations. They get so assimilated that they become typical Anglo-Americans. This is because of their color, racial characteristics and community of values. These very reasons are also the criteria that differentiate ethnic minorities from the mainstream. Kingston, thus, advocates peace through writing 'talk story', a communal, traditional Chinese activity to spread a global message. She wants to create a climate to prevent a war, seven generations from now. So, she retrieves the directives of communicating peace, represented in the three lost Chinese books of peace. These books of peace show multiple directions on how to have non-violent communication. And, Kingston does just that by rewriting, trying to figure out what was in them, to bring them back. She gives a Chinese ethnic value, which is particular to a social culture a global significance in her novel *The Fifth Book of Peace*. In her interview, she says "... but in the next book, (I hope to) say all the things I didn't say earlier and correct myself ... It will be a continuation of everything, so everything you make grows with sequels" (Skenazy and Martin, 1998).

Plum village is a successful experiment in international community living, where she invents the reasons for peace, using her woman warrior myth. *The Warrior Woman* is a 'mythopsychic autobiography'. She wants to create in the world a vision of peaceful living. She does it with this myth and preserves ethnicity (Skenazy and Martin, 1998, p. 201). Though myth is the tool for her narratives, her attitude to writing has changed. She does not write to champion Chinese American rights alone; she writes for promoting global peace.

"Have you educated America yet? Well what have you done to educate the world lately? So it's a calling, a challenge, and yet I have to do it" (Skenazy and Martin, 1998, p. 225). Kingston was on leave from Berkeley, California, for three years, teaching war veterans. In this, she was inspired by Thich Nhat Hanh, a Vietnamese monk, who conducted retreats for veterans of war. These workshops were called "Healing the Wounds of War". Most of them who attended them were Vietnam veterans from America and Vietnam. They had meditations and discussions. It was Kingston who introduced a writing workshop into their curriculum. These writing workshops included veterans

from all wars and their spouses. They had to expand the definition of a veteran. She tried “to make an art of the war that we all were in” (Skenazy and Martin, 1998, p. 226). She tries to heal war wounds and also to create art. Normally, the mainstream whites are the canon makers. Here, Chinese American Kingston shares her ethnic knowledge of how men who went to war arrived at a peaceful life after going through war.

Kingston, as an artist, establishes a new sense, a new relationship not with America or China alone, but by preventing a war by challenging the consciousness of the people through language. Language and culture are lost to a great extent in the first and second generations. People of diverse linguistics and cultural origins are citizens of a unified community. Kingston establishes a world fraternity. She advocates peace as a Chinese American. Her book is a war of words. Her concept of ‘my people’ includes every human being on earth. Hers is a global move to explore and concretize the conscience of the world, of the after-effects of war. Kingston makes use of Chinese narrative styles and story telling methods, and weaves them into the English language like a spider-woman.

In the past, Kingston wished to write alone, but now her writing is in community. In her writing workshop, she stopped thinking that she was writing alone, and was writing together in community and there are people who want to hear her stories. She evokes the ‘bodhisattva’ of compassionate listening. Kuan Yin is the goddess of mercy. Many discovered from these workshops that they always wanted to write. By writing together in a community, she convinced them of their capabilities. So, a crucial technique of a teacher is to convince her students that she does not want to hear what they have to say. In fact, they write it to her.

Kingston moves from the local to the universal. A national myth is altered dexterously to include a global concern. She advocates peace at all times. She openly denounces waging wars since it only leads to the killing of humanity. She says, “Whoever the enemy is, they’re related to us” (Kingston, 2004, p. 391). In “What the Winds Can Tell”, the critic says, “It is possible to appropriate external speech, the discourse of the other, and alter its significance”. This is exactly what Kingston and the others do to reflect their bicultural stance and to advocate their philosophies.

Through *The Fifth Book of Peace*, Kingston wished to write a hopeful story about homecoming from war, and how a war veteran can transform herself into a pacifist and nurturing, mothering, feminine human being, and become more human and humane. Since the beginning is her mother’s she understands things differently. She has grown up, becomes wiser and helps preserve human community. Since every city in the world has people from different cultural backgrounds, she adapts her traditional chant of Fa Mu Lan to suit a modern American context of peace, not war. And this wisdom emerges from a war veteran who thinks globally and wishes to become a part of a world community, retaining her ethnicity.

In *The Woman Warrior*, Kingston uses a myth to elevate women and speak a liberation story. In *The Fifth Book of Peace*, Kingston uses the same myth and remodels it to tell a story of peace and homecoming. She argues that women are not just slaves and wives,

or war mongers, but sanctuaries too. This change in Kingston, from her second generation Chinese immigrant days to her hybrid perspective, is crystalized. She adopts a peace language to speak to a global society, but first administers this in America. She presents through the Fa Mu Lan legend, all that life has taught her. Myth, for her, is an artistic tool to promote peace and denounce war. She says, "It is Western mind that taught us to doubt" (Skenazy and Martin, 1998, p. 150). So, plural consciousness helps all the colored, ethnics and the colonized to doubt Western standardization and assert their ethnic identity, while trying to assimilate themselves into the mainstream cultural ethos. But, in the process of assimilation, Kingston does retain vestiges of her Chinese heritage along with the American elements, promoting a global community as a staunch pacifist. ☐

## Bibliography

1. Barthes Roland (2000), *Mythologies*, Trans. Annette Lavers, Vintage-Random, London.
2. Edgar Andrew and Peter Sedgwick (Eds.) (2004), *Key Concepts in Cultural Theory*, Routledge-Taylor, London.
3. Gray Martin (1984), *A Dictionary of Literary Terms*, York Handbooks, Hong Kong.
4. Glazer Nathan and Daniel P Moynihan (1963), *Beyond the Melting Pot: The Negroes, Puerto Ricans, Jews, Italians, and Irish of New York City*, M I T Press, Cambridge.
5. Glazer Nathan and Daniel P Moynihan (Eds.) (1975), *Ethnicity: Theory and Experience*, Harvard UP, Cambridge.
6. Kingston Maxine Hong (1984), *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts*, Knopf, New York.
7. Kingston Maxine Hong (2004), *The Fifth Book of Peace*, Vintage, New York.
8. Li David Leiwei (1988), "The Naming of a Chinese American 'I': Cross-cultural Significations in *The Woman Warrior*", *Criticism*. Vol. 30, No. 4, pp. 497-515.
9. Macleod John (2000), *Beginning Postcolonialism*, Manchester UP, Manchester.
10. Mohanty Chandra Talpade (2003), *Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory Practicing Solidarity*, Zubaan, New Delhi.
11. Skenazy Paul and Terra Martin (Eds.) (1998), *Conversations with Maxine Hong Kingston*, UP of Mississippi, Jackson.
12. Sollors Werner (Ed.) (1989), *The Invention of Ethnicity*, Oxford UP, New York.

Reference # 43J-2008-06-07-01