

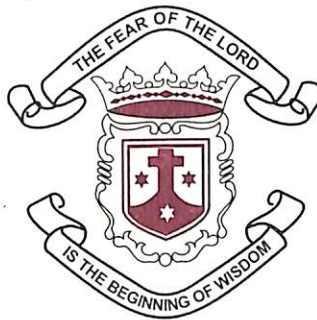
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Gender as an Explicator of Ethnicity: Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts*

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In a society comprising a single culture defining ethnicity is superfluous. America is a tossed salad of multiculturalism. In a multicultural society there are many strands of different cultures. And ethnicity permeates through differences. Ethnicity includes heritage, physical characteristics, traditions, cultural characteristics and ethnic values. In a multicultural society there is a frontier that separates ethnic minorities from the mainstream. This space is a shifting one when two cultures encounter one another. A transfer of culture, values, and stories and belief systems is possible in encounters. But women more than transfer, dexterously try to achieve the preservation of culture. Women preserve culture and thus uphold ethnicity especially in a multicultural society.

Maxine Hong Kingston is a second generation Chinese American writer. She has published six books. She is married to Earll Kingston an American actor. She retired as a member of the Faculty of Creative Writing from University of California, Berkeley. In the autobiographical work *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of A Girlhood Among Ghosts*, Kingston has given voice to a marginalized community with emphasis to women. The Chinese woman, in effect, a subaltern is more victimized and controlled by the male, just because she happens to be a woman. Like any subaltern she is enslaved and exploited, with freedom denied at all costs. Kingston reflects a culture that has enslaved and belittled Chinese women. Yet, she reconstructs from its experiences, myths, dreams of liberation and resilience. The Chinese life she critically reflects in *The Woman Warrior* is different from the traditional Chinese society today.

Women as the preservers of culture

In an orthodox conservative society like that of the Chinese, women are the culture torchbearers. Kingston's mother Brave Orchid is a culture preserver. To induce Chinese culture into the members of her family, especially her daughters Kingston says: "Night after night my mother would talk story until we fell asleep. I couldn't tell where the stories left off and the dreams began" (*TWW* 19). *The Woman Warrior*, reveals Kingston's childhood as a female growing up in America amidst dos and don'ts from her mother. She shows how through stories of immigrants and especially her mother's talk stories she has been moulded by Chinese social norms. Chinese women do not have a very crucial role to play in Chinese society. This can be illustrated by words like "Girls are maggots in the rice". 'It is more profitable to raise geese than daughters' (*TWW* 43). Every time Brave Orchid works hard to make her daughter Ting Ting Hong conform by telling her how girls should behave and be, she is actually supporting patriarchy and preserving culture. Through myth and talk stories Brave Orchid attempts to enmesh her daughter in Chinese social norms in Chinese American society. Constant reprimands, reminders and storytelling checks Kingston within ethnic boundaries. She grew up listening to these sayings, which she hated. Brave Orchid does not want the purity of Chinese culture to be lost and tarnished in her child because of Americanisation.

Kingston sees China through her mother's eyes. It mirrors the traditional Chinese community where women are not allowed to learn or speak English, women are not to express their views or rebel in any way or make attempts to get on in the world. Mothers know that daughters do leave their homes. So through stories, references and caution the daughter is prepared for life consciously and unconsciously. "There is a Chinese word for the female I- which is "slave" (*TWW* 47). "Feeding girls is feeding cow birds" (*TWW* 46). Kingston remembers the sexist gibes, which are responsible for her turn of mind as a part of her growing up. When one girl after another girl was born into her family, "One girl-and another girl," they said, and made our parents ashamed to take us out together" (*TWW* 46). All these indicate the position of women in Chinese life.

According to Chinese conservative society there is no permission to marry outside the community, and girls marry early. There is no free choice to decide your man. Kingston's mother is advised to improve her daughter's voice, if she wants a suitable bridegroom for her daughter. For Brave Orchid to realize how bad Kingston's voice is, she is told by one of the powerful voices in the community that even mainstream men or half breeds wouldn't want to marry her. "Improve that voice", she instructs Kingston's mother, "or else you'll never marry her off. Even the fool half ghosts won't have her" (*TWW* 192). Any thing or person connected to outside the family, or community is considered alien or a ghost.

There are many rituals and customs connected to Chinese social norms. In Chinese society the physical mutilation of women is another way of preserving culture. It is performed in the interests of a cultural image of feminine beauty-piercing of ears, feet are broken, "Walking erect (knees straight, toes pointed forward), not pigeon-toed, which is Chinese feminine" (*TWW* 11) body hair plucked, body powdered and painted. It is blindly accepted that an ordinary woman would want nothing more than to satisfy the body to look beautiful. But women are made conscious that they must struggle with bodily desires and not give in to it. They must conform to patriarchal notions. The first warning comes from her mother about her No-Name-Aunt who killed herself in the well because of an unwanted pregnancy. She gets married and her husband leaves for America. A year later after his departure she finds herself pregnant. Kingston is asked not to mention her name ever. This kind of deviant act is punished by erasure of existence (name). Her mother states how her father would not admit to having a sister because of the humiliation she caused them:

Don't let your father know that I told you. He denies her. Now that you have started to menstruate, what happened to her could happen to you. Don't humiliate us. You wouldn't like to be forgotten as if you had never been born. The villagers are watchful (*TWW* 5).

This story is very intense and detailed, which starts with the introduction of how women are portrayed, and how women are looked on as objects. And even in socialization gender plays an important role.

The man who gets her aunt pregnant wants to kill her because he does not want to be embarrassed, when actually it is his fault just as much as hers. She says:

The other man was not, after all, much different from her husband. They both gave orders: she followed. "If you tell your family, I'll beat you. I'll kill you. Be here again next week....She told the man, "I think I'm pregnant. He organized the raid against her. (TWW 7).

When she tells him she is pregnant he organizes the raid against her so that he can silence her. Yet he is not blamed and escapes scott free. The family treats her like an outcast; "wrongdoers eat alone" (TWW7). No Name Aunt's energy culminates in her own death unable to fight till the last. Brave Orchid tries to make her daughters submissive by telling them the advantages of being so, and the dangers of being rebellious too. She says: "The villagers punished her for acting as if she could have a private life, secret and apart from them" (TWW 12). Kingston's mother tells her about No Name Aunt because she wants her daughter to be the perfect female for their family and not go astray.

The Chinese American male's responsibility is to be the breadwinner but culture transmission is a woman's prerogative. For a male, if his culture is to be transmitted to his offspring, he is dependent on the female. Hence gender is an explicator of ethnicity. For Kingston her mother Brave Orchid helps her to preserve her ethnic cultural values. Through "talk stories" Kingston is introduced to the Chinese way of life from the cradle onwards. Werner Sollors in *Consent and Descent in American Culture* rightfully says that "ethnicity is descent and marriage is consent" (1986:6) In *The Woman Warrior* Kingston describes how Brave Orchid hands down culture and defines Kingston's cultural ethnicity much before Kingston herself becomes conscious of racial differences and identity, from other coloured minorities and mainstream. As a part of her growing up, her ethnicity is defined. It is a way of life, comprising belief systems, cultural practices, myths, rituals and oral traditions.

Women are the cultural outsiders

A woman is a preserver of culture and tradition but she is also a social and cultural outsider. Though she preserves culture it is

observed that she doesn't have a voice in setting the rules. Women like Fa Mu Lan and No Name Aunt are outside the decision making communal authority structure. They do what patriarchy administers to them. The private and public space for women is as limited as what is decided for them by the male members in their community. The Chinese man bears his allegiance first to the society then to the clan and last to his family. A man in China is subject to domination of three systems, clan, political authority and clan authority. In the case of a Chinese woman she has all these overshadowing her and the dominant male also has a major role to play in her life. Kingston quotes certain beliefs: "A husband may kill a wife who disobeys him, Confucius said" (TWW196). "Chinese smeared bad daughters in law with honey and tied them naked on top of ants nests," (TWW 196). Social and cultural pressures have silenced Kingston and undermines her confidence.

Myth

One way ethnicity survives is through myths. And myths survive when they are passed on. There is no one frozen authentic version to a myth. Myths are passed on by talk stories and writing by women. In *The Woman Warrior* Kingston uses the legend of Fa Mu Lan for the purpose of equality and justice. According to this myth Fa Mu Lan is a girl who took her father's place in battle. Girls are not allowed to join the army so after a rigorous training she disguises herself as a male warrior. Later she takes her revenge on the emperor who forces males to join his army by beheading him. She kills even the baron who drafted her brother, attacks families and leaves with their women. Fa Mu Lan is given the freedom and power of a man while retaining the secret satisfaction of knowing that she is more than just another man. Yet her love for her husband, child and family never suffers. In fact she juggles roles of daughter, wife, mother, warrior and Chinese very skillfully. Thus gender is used to explicate an ethnic story and gender brings about justice. And without justice there is no peace possible. Kingston fights for justice in *The Woman Warrior* and achieves it to the end of the novel.

Like in most societies, the woman is the preserver of culture. Brave Orchid doesn't realize that riding on the back of myths and stories is a parallel story of fighting against injustice, and for one's rights. So

the more Brave Orchid tells the female members of her family to conform, the more determined they are to fight for their rights and to prove their mettle. Kingston preserves a Chinese myth and value by moving from a particular cultural value to implement it to reveal global overtones.

She said I would grow up a wife and a slave, but she taught me the song of the warrior woman, Fa Mu Lan. I would have to grow up a warrior woman (*TWW* 20).

In *The Woman Warrior*, the women in the novel internalize the woman warrior myth and they live them out. Kingston accepts No Name Aunt as, “my aunt my forerunner,” (*TWW* 8) who “combed individuality into her bob” (*TWW* 9). No Name Aunt by her silence and death reveals her passive resistance whereas Kingston wishes to become a word warrior to awaken the world against injustice. As Kingston says in *Conversations With Maxine Hong Kingston*:

Myth is vibrant and alive as long as it keeps changing when people emigrate from China (or from anywhere), they bring myths with them, but they change the myths. And if they don't change the myths, those myths are useless and die. So I'm free with myths (218).

According to her she is writing a Chinese myth for an American audience in an American language. In answer to criticism of traditionalists Kingston says to Kay Bonnetti. “It never was a tradition to keep everything the same”. Especially since Chinese myths are “talk stories” they are modified to suit present circumstances. “Yes that mythologies and stories and rituals change to give you strength under present circumstances. Either that or they die” (*Conversations* 42). The stories change according to personalities, occasions and listeners. Kingston does not try to document traditional stories like a historian, but she documents traditional stories and uses them to suit her own ends. Hence gender is an explicator of ethnicity.

Reconstructing the myth

Asian women tend to be socially inhibited. So when they write they are making known unknown facts. Kingston has been warned not to

tell family secrets to anyone. She doesn't tell but writes them. This is a kind of baring oneself in public. Even though writing is a secretive act when printed it becomes public. In *The Woman Warrior* Kingston is warned of life by Brave Orchid, by stories like that of No Name Aunt and deriding statements like girls are "Maggots!" (TWW 191). *The Woman Warrior* is based on the myth of Fa Mu Lan, which is a fitting metaphor. Kingston fights for a completely just cause. *The Woman Warrior* is also a story of adolescence and growth. She twists her traditional chant of Fa Mu Lan to suit a modern American context. She says "The beginning is hers...but the ending is mine"(TWW 206). In the Chinese American context Kingston is the woman warrior. Kingston narrates what is going on, she shapes history by identifying with feminists and advocating a fight against injustice. *The Woman Warrior* is anthropology, sociology, feminism and Asian American history. Kingston tries to remake the world that has made her. Though born a Chinese, she tries to appropriate her Chinese American inheritance. Through all her experiences of being relegated a subaltern, she learns how to become tough within herself. By rewriting and reconstructing she has proved that she can be whoever she wants whether society agrees with her or not. She can now be a woman warrior fighting for justice, just like Fa Mu Lan who fought for her people. Kingston states many times how she rebelled against ideas of women. For example "There is an outward tendency in females, which meant that I was getting straight A's for the good of my future husband's family, not my own. I did not plan to ever have a husband. I would show my mother and father and the noisy emigrant villagers that girls have no outward tendency. I stopped getting straight A's." (TWW 47).

Maxine Kingston's life tells her readers that people need to be proud of their gender whether male or female. She has heard from her mother the chant of Fa Mu Lan so she promises herself "I would have to grow up a warrior woman" (TWW 20). She decides not to conform but to learn to fight for her rights like the warrior woman. This is frightening for Kingston because she feels that as a typical Chinese female one's community doesn't come to one's rescue when you need it most. All the same she realizes it is difficult to live based on Chinese patriarchal norms. She fights for her rights and questions her mother:

“Did you roll an egg on *my* face like that when I was born?” “Did you have a full month party for me?” “Did you turn on **all the lights?**” “Did you send *my* picture to Grandmother?” “**Why not ?** Because I am a girl? Is that why not?” (46).

Kingston realizes it is impossible to meet up to the expectations of patriarchy. According to Kingston we represent our own gender in our own individual ways. So she decides to resist stereotypes and reveal her bicultural identity. Kingston explicates ethnicity.

In the opening line of *The Woman Warrior* Brave Orchid says, “You must not tell anyone what I’m about to tell you.” The silent threat in these words was, punishment if you don’t adhere. But Kingston wants to voice the unspeakable. And thus by learning English, and using it as a weapon she preserves culture by writing talk stories searching for a bicultural identity and avenging ethnocentrism. From the age of seven, she learns English and uses this tool as a silent, confident writing woman warrior. This myth rings significantly for Kingston living in alien America, confronting racist mainstream. She is struck by the rightness of her action.

Brave Orchid supports patriarchy and at the same time provides an emancipatory role. But Kingston uses the myth of Fa Mu Lan to reshape her destiny as a word warrior educating the world of her Chinese American culture. Brave Orchid tries to make Kingston typically Chinese, whereas Kingston stretches a Chinese myth to a universal significance of fighting for justice. She says: “The swordswoman **and** I are not so dissimilar. May my people understand the resemblance **soon** so that I can return to them”(TWW 53). Since it is a conglomeration of numerous talk stories, the writer searches for her voice and an identity.

The Woman Warrior is about a young girl trying to come to an understanding of herself, she is still individuating: she is learning what is secret and what is public. “I wrote with the privacy of writing a diary. What I am writing now is about public life and about communal life, and so I set up the outside world to be the same as my inside world” (*Conversations* 197). Later Kingston etched a Chinese American identity

because her outside and inside was Chinese American. Hence Kingston explicates her bicultural identity. Both Kingston and Brave Orchid preserve culture in their own respective ways and are explicators of ethnicity. Even as Kingston finds women as mechanical carriers of culture she wants them to practice non-conformity. So she speaks in a new voice. Based on this study, women are preservers of culture but they are pushed to the peripheries, and that is an injustice.

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St. Teresa's College believes in the education and empowerment of women as the only path towards the realisation of a brighter future for humankind. The college, established in 1925, is affiliated to the Mahatma Gandhi University, Kottayam and nationally accredited at the A Level. The first college for women in the city of Kochi and the second in the state of Kerala, this premier institution pursues excellence in every aspect of teaching and learning. Turning women into individuals in their own right, individuals who by actualizing their potential, command and earn respect, is the noble task the institution embraces. This vision is an embodiment of the ideals of the Founder of the college, Mother Teresa of St. Rose of Lima, a far-sighted educationist who understood the need for educating women. Led by the Congregation of the Carmelite Sisters of St. Teresa (CSST), the college has undertaken this mission with zeal.



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