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# Consolidation of Ethnicity

## The Use of Myth in Maxine Hong Kingston<sup>†</sup>

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Globalization implies standardization. Preserving ethnicity is inherently an act of resistance to globalization, as it pits the local against the global. Maxine Hong Kingston, through the woman warrior myth, extends a local myth to universal significance. Myths ensure the survival of ethnicity. A myth is a configured form of language. Myths survive through transmission and transmission recreates the myth in multiple versions. There is no pristine version of a myth which may be considered authentic or primary. Myths are transmitted through talk stories or through writing. Kingston reconstitutes the traditional chant of Fa Mu Lan to suit a modern American context of peace, not war. She is conscious of the First World attempts to efface the Chinese American identity. Preserving ethnicity through myth is a counter action to the First World hegemony. America, presumably, upholds multiculturalism. But Americanization is an attempt at standardization or globalization. Ethnicity comprehends heritage, physical characteristics, traditions, cultural characteristics and ethnic values. Consolidating ethnicity is an act of resistance, as it seeks to preserve and assert ethnic identity, and to prevent the homogenization of ethnic minorities. The transformation and recreation of myths prevents their lapse into cliché. Subtle changes in the orientation and configuration of myths work out the fine adjustments that match alterations in culture, values, and belief systems. Ethnicity is not a condition of stasis. In a cultural context of plurality, ethnicity must be a dynamic condition marked by a constant dialogue with the mainstream. Kingston is conscious of this dialogue. In the globalizing world, ethnicity can survive only by remaining *dynamic*. Ethnic identities resist the hegemony of mainstream culture by infiltrating and undermining the American language itself. Kingston does this by repositioning the warrior woman myth. The myth is *reworked to transcend* its local moorings. Kingston does this by giving the familiar myth a context-transcending cutting edge.

**G**lobalization is neoliberalism, privatization and monoculturalism. It has allowed a dialogue across differences allowing people to become fluent with each other's histories. But this is a weighted dialogue tuned for the absorption and effacement of the ethnic. Americanization

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essentially predicated monoculture. It includes the melting pot theory, assimilation and acculturation, which has shattered cultural models. The desire for monopoly and erasure of cultures into a single homogeneous one is a major motive of white America. Globalization is a homogenizing force. Ethnicity, on the contrary, is a differentiating or diversifying force. Myths are political instruments of ethnic consolidation and assertion. Kingston occupies a political space that exposes the contradictions of globalization. The apparent integration of globalization subsumes deep conflicts of racial, class, gender, and historical identities. Globalization conceals these differences. Chandra Talpade Mohanty (2003, p. 171) says, "Globalization is a slogan, an overused and under-understood concept". Globalization is good, if it is a re-mapping of systematic global inequalities. But this is not the case. Globalization, which is Americanization or standardization, is dissented by ethnic identities like Kingston. Kingston uses ethnicity as a critical prism, which refracts and lays bare the lines of contestation. Ethnicity combines one's ethos, language, ethnic and cultural values, traditions and physical and cultural characteristics. When one upholds ethnicity within a globalizing context, there is both a conservation of cultural specifics and their reiteration before a wider audience. This is an act of resistance. Ethnicity is employed as a political instrument to contest the hegemonic impulse. As Dahrendorf observes, inequalities "serve to keep social structures alive" (Introduction to Daniel and Nathan's (1975), *Ethnicity: Theory and Experience*, p. 5). Differences can be embodied in cultural practices, ethnic idiom, myth, vocabulary, narrative techniques and biological traits. Kingston asserts her difference through the use of myth. She reinvents ethnicity to interrogate the modern American context. Ethnic identities constantly change and redefine themselves. Carried to literature and art, these expose the totalizing fallacies of globalization. Maxine Hong Kingston is a second generation Chinese American, who experiences the push-pull or dualities of culture. She can't shake off the old world-view; at the same time, she feels too raw for the new. She uses language as a medium to write back; to resist infiltration by infiltrating the hegemonic American form (English); and her ethnic myth becomes an instrument of assertion.

## Myths

On one way, ethnicity survives through myths. It is through a silent existence that myth reaches an oral stage. In Kingston's case myths stem from the Chinese oral traditions. A myth is an archetype, a narrative, a sign of verbal and visual speech. According to Barthes (2000, p. 109), "myth is a type of speech". It is a verbal or visual speech that communicates to its readers. According to Kingston the woman warrior is a myth of a woman with war-like qualities and also an archetype, possessing rare skills of being able to transcend gender roles and rising to suit the occasion. Kingston communicates the central ideas by resorting to myths, because myth is a language and it can communicate effectively. And by writing, myth is documented. Roland Barthes in *Mythologies* says, "men do not have with a myth a relationship based on truth but on use: they depoliticize according to their needs" (144). Through a myth, one communicates a message. Writers of ethnic identities like Kingston include myths from their own culture, thus charging the language (English). They may introduce new myths or awaken the realization of similar myths in other cultures too.

### ***The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts***

*The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts* is Kingston's semi-autobiographical novel (1976). It was first titled as *Gold Mountain Heroes*, but later the publishers, noticing the central



metaphor of the woman warrior, changed the title to *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts*. The myth of Fa Mu Lan is the woman warrior myth, which recurs in Kingston's most recent work—*The Fifth Book of Peace*—as well. To build the myth, Kingston looks for an inspirational figure, "an archetype of a woman" (*Conversations*, p. 131) from Chinese myth with masculine powers. Fa Mu Lan is a young girl of seven who undergoes training for 15 years. She disguises herself as a man and fights a battle for her family and village. In spite of this responsibility, she also fulfils her traditional role of wife, daughter, daughter-in-law and clanswoman. She listened to her mother narrating Brave Orchid's "talk stories" and grew up in a story-telling atmosphere. She says: "But I was raised in a storytelling culture," (*Conversations*, p. 122). This book is a liberation story.

### **Myths are Altered as Per Convenience**

A myth does not have one frozen authentic version only. Kingston writes and alters moving from a particular cultural myth to reveal shades of global relevance. In *The Woman Warrior*, she says: "I learned to make my mind large as the universe is large" (29). This attitude helps her to document traditional stories and use them to suit her own ends. Kingston telescopes this cultural and gender signifier into a universal one. She 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" (*Conversations*, 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 horse back with Fa Mu Lan, proficient in martial arts, and who goes to battle wearing male attire. 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 gain currency, and to please the American predilection for novelty. David Leiwei Li (1988) 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 endeavor her male correspondent is capable of (507).

### **The Fifth Book of Peace (2004)**

Kingston twists her traditional chant of Fa Mu Lan to suit a modern American context of peace, not war. And this wisdom emerges from Kingston, a war veteran who suffered. The ethnic woman has matured to greater tolerance and perceptive abilities, through her suffering. She wishes to become a part of world community. She would turn global while retaining her ethnicity. Kingston reveals that without compromising with one's ties, one can still care for human beings. She begins to chant and invent like her mother. Speaking to Paul Skenazy she says, "I take the old myths and I play with them, show how the myths change. And when they change here in America they become American myths" (*Conversations*, p. 131). Kingston in *The Fifth Book of Peace* writes a hopeful story about homecoming from war. A war veteran can transform himself/herself to a peaceful, nurturing, mothering, feminine human being and become more human and humane. Though Fa Mu Lan is described as a battle-axe type in the first book, in the second book the emphasis is on her artistic side and that she is a weaver. "To make a woman character a weaver is so wonderful because that is a woman's art," (*Conversations*, p. 131). Just as the word texture has something to do with weaving, text has something to do with writing. So weaving and writing have a connection. The ending of

*The Woman Warrior* was done with great care since she did not want to diffuse the idea of a woman fighting for justice. According to Kingston, warring and writing are similar. The writer struggles with words, just as the soldier fights with nations. Kingston's book is a war of words. She is weaving the meaning of "my people" (*Conversations*, p. 188) including "I mean everybody" (p. 188). This includes every human being on earth. Hers is a move to conscientize the world of the aftereffects of war. Kingston makes use of Chinese narrative styles and story telling methods, and weaves it in the English language like a spider woman. But in *The Fifth Book of Peace* the woman warrior myth is developed still further. Fa Mu Lan is not only a soldier but also a weaver, and reveals to her army that she is a woman dressed as a man. Though she fought and vanquished her enemies like a man, she disbands the army asking them to go home. She says, "Fa Mu Lan leads her army home and reveals she is a woman. She shows the troops herself changing back from a man to a woman, and gives them a vision of the Feminine. It is possible for a soldier to become feminine" (*The Fifth Book of Peace*, p. 390). Fa Mu Lan is not brutalized by war. She comes back after war, retaining the soft feelings of a human being. Kingston indicates a woman still has the soft feelings of a woman. Here soft feelings do not refer to flippancy or weakness but merely indicates that she has not become hard or a cynic because of war experiences. But in *The Fifth Book of Peace* Kingston mentions this "to show soldiers a woman is capable of everything" (*Conversations*, p. 132). Women can take credit for all Fa Mu Lan did. A war veteran who wrote to Kingston described: "Yes women are sanctuary; women bring soldiers home" (*The Fifth Book of Peace*, pp. 247-248), a warring person can possess qualities of peace.

## Repositioning Myth

Kingston moves from the local to the universal. One notices that Kingston's work begins with Fa Mu Lan, legend of a woman warrior, and converges into a soldier becoming feminine—advocating peace in times of war. A national myth is repositioned dexterously to include a thought of global resonance—peace at all times. Waging wars, she openly denounces, since it only leads to the killing of humanity. One should feel for one's fellowmen. She says, "Whoever the enemy is, they're related to us" (*The Fifth Book of Peace*, 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 (44). And this is exactly what Kingston and the others do to reflect their bicultural stance and to advocate their philosophies. In a warring world, Kingston advocates peace through the myth of woman warrior.

There are several factors that made Kingston denounce war. In the 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. Kingston worked towards peace, because her brothers were in the defense services during the war. She was in the church sanctuary for Absence Without Leave (AWOL) soldiers. Being a peace activist, she wished to stop the war and fight for peace. She was horrified that her son would be drafted someday. She was a woman protective about her son and brothers. Kingston says, "I didn't want my son to grow up in a world where there is going to be a draft" (*Conversations*, p. 196). Kingston writes a peace language through the linguistic element of myth and repositions the woman warrior myth as a homecoming story.

## Language

Kingston from her own losses and conversations with war veterans is aware that one can learn a lot from suffering. She says: "Ah, suffering, is also very important. You need to suffer in order to learn from your suffering. We may suffer uselessly, but if we look deep into our suffering we can learn a lot from that" (*The Fifth Book of Peace*, p. 384). Once one is aware of this, one can alleviate suffering. So Kingston advocates peace and writes a peace language from a tolerant Chinese American identity. She changes the consciousness of people through language, which should be a nonviolent communication. Using English, she avoids erasure and erases certain wrong notions of ethnic minorities. For this, she uses ethnic myth. By writing "you make history" (*The Fifth Book of Peace*, 266), the writer uses language as a tool to prevent war. Kingston knows only if something is said today "to create a climate to prevent a war 10 years from now" (*Conversations*, p. 168), will something come out of this attempt. The American war policies and overrunning of cultures still exists. The American views are monolithic and solipsistic. Kingston says: "One good thing that came out of the Vietnam War is raised consciousness, the idea that war is bad, and there is no winning" (*The Fifth Book of Peace*, p. 272). The world has begun to question war and strongly advocate peace. It is said that, "An artist changes the world by changing consciousness and changing the atmosphere by means of language" (*Conversations*, p. 169). She invents the reasons for peace using her woman warrior myth. She says: The images of peace are ephemeral. The language of peace is subtle. The reasons for peace, the definitions for peace, the very idea of peace have to be invented, and invented again (Epilogue, p. 402). And Kingston does this with myth. Kingston says, "I want to change the world through artistic pacifist means" (*Conversations*, p. 168). One of the most obvious ways in which globalization is understood is in terms of the production of an epoch of "borderlessness" (Mohanty, 2003, p. 172). Being a hybrid, she was able to think critically and carefully about political problems and how to articulate and defend their views. "Our mind must be ready to move as capital is to trace its paths and to imagine alternative destinations" (Mohanty, p. 251). Hence, Kingston approves of social, linguistic and cultural mobility, which is ushered in by globalization but believes in asserting her alternative destiny by consolidating ethnicity through the woman warrior myth. Kingston uses the woman warrior myth to understand modern concepts and to denounce mainstream ideologies and to propagate peace. In turn, this kind of focus makes one aware of the evils of modern and western societies. Having moved through the furnace of life experiences, she has become an advocate for world peace. Since then she has written language of peace. As Kingston tells Donna Perry, "I am looking for a language of peace. I am trying to rewrite a book of peace" (*Conversations*, p. 184). I'm going to rewrite them, but in a different way" (*Conversations*, p. 174). It will be a continuation of everything. It's a struggle to break through taboos to find one's voice. Asian Americans are cultural ambassadors if war veterans can write about post-traumatic stress, and write about peace after going through war. And this wisdom emerges from Kingston who thinks globally and wishes to become a part of a world community, while retaining her ethnicity. Kingston wants to change the world through artistic and pacifist means. 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 (*Conversations*, pp. 168-169).

Kingston gives a Chinese ethnic value, which is particular to a social culture, and of global significance. Ethnicity permeates through differences. Also, in *The Fifth Book of Peace*, nationality permeates boundaries. Being a Chinese American, Kingston translates well.

In *The Fifth Book of Peace*, what Kingston advocates a peace language—nonviolence—as a means to enlarge the area of understanding between different ethnic groups. Kingston advocates peace through myth and writing “talk story”, a communal, traditional, Chinese activity to spread a global message. Kingston says, “The beginning is hers, the ending, mine” (*The Woman Warrior*, 206) referring to her mother’s “talk stories”, which Kingston alters as she wishes. Speaking to Eric J Schroeder, she says, “Myth is vibrant and alive as long as it keeps changing. When people emigrate from China (or from anywhere else), they bring myths with them, but they change the myths. And if they don’t change those myths, those myths are useless and die. So I’m free with myths” (*Conversations*, p. 218). Kingston’s mother wishes to build a *sangha*, a community house of the Chinese. But Kingston stretches, it still further to make it a global community. “Plum village is a successful experiment in international community” (*The Fifth Book of Peace*, p. 390). There is a psychological change in her attitudes; instead of writing and seizing on Chinese rights alone she writes for promoting global peace. She wants to create a vision of global, peaceful living. She does it with this myth and preserves ethnicity raising the significance of the Chinese woman warrior myth. She uses myth dexterously and subtly as a tool to heighten Chinese cultural significance. Only when the myth is kept alive not by just a community does it gain ground, but when remembered and kept alive globally does it get a footing and relevance. Under the pretext of advocating global peace, she wins the heart of her readers, but riding on its back the literary cultural tool, myth, which she uses to make a space for herself, at the same time resisting monoculture or globalization, and transcends the stereotyped role given to women. In *The Fifth Book of Peace*, Kingston reveals that she has changed to believing that is not national but world community is to be striven for. Only an artist like her can prevent a war by challenging the consciousness of the people by the powerful use of language. Kingston advocates peace as a Chinese American.

Speaking about western culture, Kingston says, “they taught us how to doubt. That’s part of the Western mind” (*Conversations*, p. 150). So Kingston doubts the intentions of Western standardization and asserts her alternative culture. Kingston feels that she is being included as a part of American people under the pretext of Westernization and at the same time not allowed to assert her ethnic traits because of Chinese cultural erasure. So she tries to find her way back by asserting her ethos or ethnic identity. For this, she uses ethnic myth, a language, a tool to contribute to American literature and multiculturalism.

## Consolidating Ethnicity

Kingston consolidates ethnicity for various reasons consciously and unconsciously. One of the main reasons is to educate America. She says: “So it’s a calling, a challenge, and yet I have to do it” (*Conversations*, p. 225). It is the natural outcome of her duality—writing from her experiences. Secondly, it is the outcome of a dialectics of resistance. Ethnocentrism paves the way for self-actualization and asserting one’s identity. Resistance paves the way for cultural preservation, which she does using myth as a tool. What started out in *The Woman Warrior* as a story of feminism and liberation from the crippling norms of the Chinese life, ended up in *The Fifth Book of Peace* with Kingston advocating peace through the language of ethnic myth. So a cultural myth has been altered

and invested with global significance. Myth is a linguistic element, by means of which Kingston makes universal something particular. She elevates the position of Chinese cultural myths by bringing them within the purview of a wider audience. By creating an awareness of her rich ethnic culture she preserves Chinese culture, acting as a cultural ambassador.

Individuals reinvent ethnicity in different generations. Ethnicity is something modern because it is not to be understood in terms of the past, or of ethnic groups living together following their own way of life. Neither it is to be understood in terms of clear-cut boundaries nor in terms of mixing of individuals, who become ethnically conscious of distinctions in the process of mixing (a shared cultural context) and regard these visible distinctions as a modern feature of a contrasting strategy. Werner Sollors, in his introduction to *The Invention of Ethnicity*, says, "ethnicity is not so much an ancient and deep-seated force surviving from the historical past, but rather the modern and modernizing feature of a contrasting strategy that may be shared far beyond the boundaries within which it is claimed" (p. xiv). The linguistic element plays a central role in the construction of a social universe. Sollors says, "it is the ethnic text's ability to generate the sense of difference out of a shared cultural context" (Sollors, p. xvi). Ethnicity is to be understood as a modern yet natural strategy that becomes visible in cultural encounters and is a conscious process against monoculturalism or globalization. Since it is modern, it continues to be the center of major discussions and debates, though it starts from the past. ❏

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