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## **Maxine Hong Kingston: A Journey from Breaking Silence to Self-Assertion**

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### **Abstract:**

Maxine Hong Kingston is widely recognized as one of the most important Chinese American female writers in the late twentieth century. Her epic novels detail the experiences of first generation Chinese Americans. She has created a worldwide sensation through her first work *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood among Ghosts*. In her book she combines legend, autobiography and the biographies of female relatives to explore both the despair and triumphs of women. This paper aims to study Kingston's work as an effort of a woman to reconcile American and Chinese female identities. It will describe her journey of life and plight of an individual who is pulled between two cultures. By using Talk-story as a narrative strategy how she tries to reclaim voices of generation of Chinese immigrants whose silence has kept their stories from being told and valued as worthy narratives.

**Keywords: Chinese American, Silence, Talk-story, Immigrant Identity, Sexism, Misogyny, Self- Assertion.**

*The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood among Ghosts* records Kingston's struggle for self-expression. It is journey of a mute school girl who smeared paper with opaque black paint, the incommunicative adolescent who could not voice her sorrow to her mother, the inarticulate young adult who could only peep in protest to her racist employers eventually she becomes the adult artist who "talk story" in a "high and clear" voice. From the very beginning she was told to be silent especially in case of her aunt. As her mother instructs her: "you must not tell anyone...what I am about to tell you." In addition she describes the silences of the individuals in her family, such as No Name Woman, her aunt Moon Orchid, the silence of her own childhood and other Chinese girls, her friends and playmates in school. Very often she talks the majority of Chinese immigrants as mute. These individual silences reflect the silence of the whole Chinese American community, even the early Chinese immigrants in the United States.

As far as Kingston's life is concerned, as a young girl she was often confused about her dual American and Chinese heritage. Her parents were Chinese immigrants who came to the United States in search of a better life even in the United States life was very hard for them. Moreover, they had to do a lot of menial work in order to survive. Like other immigrant children, Kingston, too had to work in the family business. Her early life was surrounded by Chinese immigrants and her early years of education were better described as silent years as it was very difficult for a Chinese speaker to adjust in American school system i.e. in an English speaking world. All such confusion she describes in her book.

*The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood among Ghosts* is a self-narration for the female protagonist-narrator, Kingston, whose psychological development is largely shaped by her mother's talk story practice. As the book records the inner emotional and mental workings,

which is filled with stories of her ancestors and female relatives, of the narrator, and delineates the significant events that shape her development in girlhood.

On the one hand Kingston is sharing with us stories of oppression of her Chinese female relatives by both Chinese traditions and white racist American society. While on the other she does her all possible efforts to provide them their own identity and in making they realize their existence. In doing so she herself takes an initiative through this book. *The Woman Warrior* revolves around the issues that are complicated by gender and ethnicity. The five sections of the book are shaped by the cultural narratives of both China and United States. Each narrative focuses on the situation of the women in Kingston's family.

The text deals with the two types of identity- the immigrant identity and the Asian American identity. It is Kingston's effort to construct identity in the main stream American culture. Generally Chinese, especially women are treated badly not only in the United States but also in their own community. People even do not hesitate to exclude their name from the family history. Such as No Name Woman who remains silent at this injustice. Unlike No Name Woman Maxine believes in the power of articulation and eventually discovers her voice and the courage to employ it.

Talk story plays an important role in writing such experiences. By using it as a medium Kingston presents a rich array of stories which enable her to behave in a certain way. No-Name Woman episode describes the plight of a woman who is oppressed by her own Chinese traditions. She commits suicide because of her illegitimate pregnancy and bearing a child without marriage. Despite this the family punishes this taboo breaker by never speaking of her and by denying her name in the family. But Kingston breaks the family silence by writing about this rebel whom she calls "my forebear." In spite of all her mother's instruction: "You must not tell anyone...what I am about 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."(WW,11)

Another female victim is Kingston's other aunt, her mother's sister Moon Orchid. She remains silent and keeps on waiting for her husband in China, who has remarried in America and settled in a new family. When she meets him after the period of long thirty years he greets her with cold interrogations: "What are you doing here?" and "Why you are here?", and questions her intention: "What do you want?" Facing this situation she does not continue to accuse her husband and claim her right as a wife. It is her weakness that ruins her. She dare not say a word to a man who has made her widow and eventually insane. She has no strength to defend herself, no power to fight back, and no courage to claim the rights belonging to her. Obviously, Silence here implies the oppression and suffering of Chinese women as victims over a long period in a male-dominated society.

The tragedies of No-Name Woman and Moon Orchid are caused by sexism and misogyny in Chinese culture. From her two aunts' tragic lives, Kingston learns that a woman is doomed to be victim if she is dependent. Only by bringing her fate under her own control she can manage to claim her rights and live in dignity.

Kingston actually criticizes both the Chinese patriarchal tradition and the American racist attitude. Both the traditions have "silenced women", taking their agency. Silence, on the one

hand, illustrates the situation of the entire Chinese American community in American history. She describes the silence of Chinese immigrants in the United States and their voiceless lives because of hard work and unfair treatment, she writes about people who have been deliberately neglected by the mainstream society over a long period 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. However, silence can also be interpreted as a speechless revolt of a woman against the patriarchal society.

Voice, on the other hand, represents the feminist awareness of Chinese American women, since Western feminism, as traditionally understood, is speaking up, demanding women's rights, refusing to be looked down upon, which is the opposite of silence. Kingston portrays the voices of Chinese American women in the book. Furthermore, these voices take different forms which do not only include articulation and speaking up, but also refer to oral literature, writing and literary creation, which use words as weapon to fight for women's rights.

*The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of A Girlhood among Ghosts* examine different forms of voice: as the voice can be articulation, speaking and expressing one's own opinions, even talk-stories and oral literature which carry the Chinese classic literature and tradition. Moreover, the voice can also be interpreted as writing and even rewriting classic literature in order to deliver a new voice. As Kingston is aware of the importance of women's voice articulation, besides the silent aunt and No- Name Woman, she describes many women characters that are able to, and dare to express their thoughts by articulation. Among them Brave Orchid represents the strongest voice. She is an intimidating tradition bound mother who in many ways displays the fierce determination, energy and power of the women warriors she often speaks of. She tells the prohibited stories to her daughter. Unlike ordinary Chinese women at that time who are mostly housewives with little education, Kingston's mother invests money into education. Her spirit for learning is really praiseworthy. She processes her own career and works hard; she has no fear of men and she knows how to defend herself and protect others. For example, when she accompanies her sister Moon Orchid to visit her husband, in answering Moon Orchid's question "What if he hits me?" she replies: "I'll hit him. I'll protect you. I'll hit him back." Her own life story represents a strong voice as well as a voice that reveals a brave and respected, powerful Chinese woman.

Kingston prepares herself to fight against the patriarchal norms of society. Thus, she uses her mother's talk stories as a vehicle to achieve the target. Keeping in mind all these stories of her female relatives and her own childhood experiences she determines her responsibility as an author to build a bridge between her and others, in order to help others to understand human individual selves and the society. In doing so Kingston has been acting as a "woman warrior" herself. She uses pen and words as weapons, attempting to influence and change American society's misunderstanding, exclusion and discrimination against the Chinese. As a second generation Chinese American, she also intends to reconcile her Chinese cultural heritage with her sense of identity as an American to finally reach the state of cultural integration and the formation of a new identity. Today she has made her identity in the main stream American culture. In this way Kingston manages to break the silence by narrating her experience and revealing the truth into words. Thus breaking silence, especially breaking females' silences, is connected with acknowledging female influence and female power.

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