Warriors, Wives and Writers- Fantasy or Reality? : Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*[1]

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Abstract

This paper engages in a critical discussion of one of the most basic concerns underlying contemporary literary feminism: what does it mean to "speak as" and "for" women? The paper reviews some of the conflicting theories of white and non-white literary feminists on the politics of representation, while analyzing Maxine Hong Kingston's memoir **The Woman Warrior.** It argues that Kingston's memoir is a text with a feminist agenda, which could be located in the text's strategies of narrativization. Finally the paper demonstrates how **The Woman Warrior** calls for a redefinition of the genre of minority literature, while urging for a rethinking of western literary practices.

1. Introduction

Literary feminism's challenge in the 20th century to the Western literary canon for its androcentricity arguably redefined the tapestry of Western literature. Feminists have vehemently challenged the myth that women writers were non-existent, by convincingly demonstrating that women writers have been rendered invisible. Since the critical establishment has privileged mostly men writers, British and American feminist critics in the 1970s sought to resurrect the lost work of women authors and to demonstrate that women have indeed written their gendered subjectivity into their texts. But the aim was not merely to fit women into a male dominated tradition. Building on the affinity those women writers have felt for their literary foremothers, feminist critics have emphasized the need of a

tradition among women themselves (Eagleton, 1996: 01). Virginia Woolf's assertion that we think back through our mothers if we are women ((Eagleton, 1996: 73) exemplifies the presence of a female literary tradition.

But a theoretical position that resorts to a matriarchal literary lineage does have a double edge to it-for it threatens to replicate the patriarchal worldview of a hierarchical gendering of difference. As Linda R. Williams argues, the feminist assumption of a distinct matrilineal tradition merely reiterates the patriarchal ethos which prescribes value to the mother as creator, thereby resorting to what Williams terms as a rather essentialist 'genetic verification' (Eagleton, 1996: 54). Even Elaine Showalter who had otherwise championed the cause of a matriarchal literary heritage articulates uneasiness albeit from a different perspective. By interrogating the terms 'feminist movement' and 'female imagination' she warns that such theoretical positions could be easily overwhelmed by biologistic and essentialist viewpoints that imply that males and females perceive the world in intrinsically different ways (Showalter, 1996:15). The challenge before contemporary feminism seemingly then is to construct and

[1] I would like to gratefully acknowledge the insightful comments given by Carmen Wickramagamage at the initial stages of this article.

critically engage in theoretical perspectives, however vibrant they may appear, which do not ultimately reduce itself and women to the pre-determined category of 'woman'.

At this point one has to ask the question, how can feminist literature and critical practices not only escape the culturally charged terrain of the male/female binary but on what theoretical grounds do they construct themselves? In other words, how do they define ways to locate the feminist agenda in women's writing, without replicating essentialist domains of gender? This provides the perfect entry point for a discussion of Maxine Hong Kingston's "memoir" **The Woman Warrior** which traces the physical and psychological landscape of growing up Chinese American in America. Born in America to emigrant Chinese parents, Kingston's childhood and adolescence were marked by struggle (Soderstrom, 1996:02). For the young narrator overcoming financial constraints and coming to terms with her bi-cultural identity was a process underlined with confusion and pain. Added to this was the gendered experience of growing up, in what she calls "the emigrant village", where traditional Chinese patriarchal values appear to be transplanted. The unnamed narrator in the text traverses this culturally charged terrain both emotionally and physically.

Is **The Woman Warrior** a woman's autobiography with a feminist agenda? If so, where in the text can we locate it? Or as Sara Suleri contends, does the use of lived experience as an alternative mode of subjectivity only rehearse the objectification of the subject? (1994:248). By raising these pivotal issues, this paper aims to explore the possibilities of locating **The Woman Warrior** as a feminist narrative which interrogates the gendering of race.

2. How do women speak? : Politics of re/presentation

How **can/do** women speak? As Soshana Felman demands, is 'speaking as a woman' a fact determined by anatomy or by culture? :

> (W)hat if speaking as a woman were not a simple natural fact, could not be taken for granted. But what does 'speaking for women' imply? What in a general manner does 'speak in the name of' mean? (1989:58).

This brings the discussion back to its engagement with, or interrogation rather, of the act of representation. Representation is undeniably ideologically maneuvered, and by re/presenting a writer could be privileging one set of realities over the others. All accounts of reality, as Coward succinctly puts it, are only versions of reality (1985: 227).

Many non-white and lesbian literary feminists have argued against western feminism's tendency to speak for them, to re/present them, thereby arguably to engage in an act of silencing and appropriating. These critics have challenged universalistic notions of 'woman' and 'femininity'. By questioning the white heterosexual assumptions underlying western feminism, they demonstrate that the diverse lived experiences of women could not be reduced to a monolithic category of 'woman'. This departure from mainstream feminism not only dismantles a homogenous notion of womanhood, but perhaps even more significantly, has served to generate a debate on the need for different feminist theoretical perspectives grounded on women's sexual, racial and national

identities. Protesting the 'master discourse' position Western feminism has assumed, Chandra Mohanty also problematizes third world feminists' desire to 'nationalize' or 'nativize' (1994: 96). She raises the pivotal issue of how third world feminism should escape historically reductive formulations which reinforce the division between First and Third world women that ultimately posits the third world as absolute difference (1994:59). She argues that such theoretical positions would merely feed patriarchal assumptions of 'woman' as a category which is essentially linked to an authentic, indigenous tradition. Though Mohanty's argument is primarily for third world women, it could be extended to non-white women and women who constitute minority populations in the west. While the tendency to overlook the multiplicity of non-white women's lived experiences can certainly be damaging to the heterogeneity of their experiences, literary practices which resort to essentializing them for the sake of "fitting them in " to the main literary tradition, could be lethal.

Maxine Hong Kingston's **The Woman Warrior** challenges not just the erasure of non-white women from the American literary canon, but problematizes the 'exotic' value currently prescribed for 'minority' writing in the west, by demonstrating that there is not a single, homogenous alternative or marginalized reality "waiting" to be represented. If anything, Kingston's text establishes not only the multiplicity of experience, but also the need to perceive this multiplicity without reducing it into trite literary categories. In other words, Kingston's task is double edged. Hers is a text which represents experiences of growing up in a minority community in America, but it also subverts the acts of re/presentation to reveal the politics that underlie it.

Readers are warned at the beginning that this text is not about 'capturing' a reality. Ironically the fact that the text offers only a version of reality is established, through a 'story' told by the narrator's mother as a warning of the consequences women have to endure for transgressing boundaries. Brave Orchid's, the narrator's mother's, stories are meant to exemplify an accommodative ideal of the Chinese woman. However the text begins with a dual violation of the patriarchal ideology which presupposes and shapes that ideal. "You must not tell anyone what I am about to tell you" (Kingston, 1996:3) warns the narrator's mother, but by re-telling the story to her reader, the narrator shatters the secrecy imposed upon No Name aunt and thereby threatens the patriarchal power that circumvents women's lives and speech. The erasure of the aunt's name from the family history is the patriarchal punishment for her sexual transgression. And her act of self immolation-suicide- implies total suppression. But as Sidonie Smith too has demonstrated, the aunt's refusal to utter the name of the lover/rapist could be interpreted as an act of resistance (1999:70). By withholding that information from village patriarchy, the aunt deliberately denies access to her consciousness. Silence, as Sunder Rajan too has demonstrated in a different context (1993:84) could be a powerful statement of resistance.

But by imaging and imagining the prodigal aunt's story, and speaking the unspeakable, even the parts her mother does not disclose, the narrator resurrects the No Name Aunt through writing. But the No Name aunt remains unnamed in the text. And one wonders whether the narrator desires to deliberately withhold the name as an act of resistance; for what cannot be named cannot be probed either. And the narrator is undeniably aware of the dangers inherent in the act of re/presenting the aunt's story. She admits, " I alone devote pages of paper to her...I do not think that she always means me well. I am telling

on her and she was a spite suicide" (Kingston 16). Here Kingston seems to be only too aware of the problematic of 'speaking for' another. Instead of romanticizing her choice of retelling what is deemed as taboo-the aunt's story- Kingston freely admits the inherent ambivalence in 'retelling'. To 'retell' is to 'represent'; to enter discourse reality has to undergo reconstruction as well as reduction. And Kingston is cautious to warn the reader that this story is only *her* version.

But re/presentations of stories narrated by older women hold a pivotal role in Chinese American women's writing. Writers like Amy Tan and Natasha Chang appropriate the stories of their foremothers to resurrect the past in order to understand the present. Though in Tan's novels, the stories of foremothers represent a problematic 'oriental wisdom', in Chang's autobiographical text ***Bound Feet and Western Dress***, the narrator emerges from her sense of cultural displacement after associating with her great aunt who recounts her life story. The three writers Tan, Chang and Kingston though they differ in their literary approaches, demonstrate how the first generation of Chinese emigrant women transmit stories to the young Chinese American women. They in turn resurrect these stories through recording them, or as Kingston says "reporting" them (1996:53). This matrilineal tradition bears two striking features: it is the lives of women that are resurrected by and for women and the stories are marked by their fusion of the real and the imagined.

In the text the narrator's mother, Brave Orchid, also recounts stories of a mythical woman warrior. And as the woman warrior comes alive in her mother's stories, the narrator feels empowered "at last, I saw that I too had been in the presence of great power, my mother talking-story" (1996:19). She imagines herself as the mythical Fa Mu Lin who transgresses the traditional bounds for women to take up arms in a man's battlefield - "I would have to grow up a warrior woman" (1996: 20). Yet Fa Mu Lin becomes a warrior to avenge the injustice done to her family. So, the woman warrior's act of transgression is actually an act contained and sanctioned by patriarchy; as the narrator admits with a note of irony, "the villagers would make a legend about my perfect filiality" (1996:45). And even though she challenges the stereotypical space prescribed to Chinese femininity by patriarchal tradition, the woman warrior cannot escape the bounds of her body[2]. The words of revenge are engraved on to the flesh of her back. Though critics like Susan Gubar have drawn upon the link between women's creativity and their bodies, by arguing that women's bodies are the ultimate source of self-expression (1982: 82), such views could also unwittingly engender the assumption that women are indeed unable to transgress their bodies.

Kingston, however, seems to refute such assumptions of creativity. Though the young narrator imagines herself as the woman warrior, she also learns that her tool of self-expression is the ability to perceive and represent multiple realities, or the ability to **not to** reduce reality to an accommodative ideal. But the process, at the end of which she arrives at this self-realization, is painful.

The narrator shifts from the woman warrior's story to her own only to become acutely aware of the striking contrast; she admits, "my American life has been such a disappointment" (Kingston, 1996: 45). Unlike the mythical but inspiring

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[2] Amy Tan too demonstrates this when one of her narrators cuts off a piece of her flesh to sacrifice for her mother's health in the **Joy Luck Club**.

landscape the warrior woman inhabits, the narrator's environs are seen as stunting her growth. The Chinese community interprets her exemplary academic performance as an 'outward tendency' (1996: 47), for a girl's performance is considered to be beneficial only to her future husband's family. In retaliation, the narrator deliberately allows herself to neglect her studies and protests the misogynist assumptions undermining her childhood. But continuing to feel a social misfit amidst the Chinese and Americans alike, she images herself as insane, "I thought every house had to have its crazy woman or crazy girl, every village its idiot. Who would it be at our house? Probably me." (1996:189). Insanity is not romanticized here as an alternative site of rebellion, for the narrator defines insanity as the absence of speech "I thought talking and not talking made the difference between sanity and insanity" (1996: 186). The text imagines the lack of speech negatively. In her childhood and youth the narrator struggles to find a voice of her own. Trapped between the two languages, Chinese and English, in the early days in American school she becomes silent. While Chinese is "the language of impossible dreams" (1996: 85), English renders her mute "a dumbness-a shame-still cracks my voice in two even when I want to say ' hello' casually" (1996:165). For her entire first year in school she does not speak to anyone and notices that the other Chinese girls do not speak either. Her contention that the condition had something to do with being Chinese is reaffirmed when she notes that at Chinese school in the evenings the same girls became extremely vocal (1996: 166). As a solution to the problem the narrator temporarily adopts an 'American-feminine' voice which she rather ruefully admits was almost "inaudible" (1996: 60). Kingston problematizes her "adopted" voice through two episodes: the narrator's harassment of the silent girl at school and her final articulation of protest against her mother.

The narrator identifies the silent girl as a failure. She even insults her openly "you are such a nothing" (1996: 174), thereby equating the absence of English speech to absence of selfhood. Others have argued that the unnamed, silent girl represents the narrator's alter ego (Wong, 1993: 88), interpreting the senseless harassment of the girl as the narrator's way for punishing herself for her growing fear of losing her sanity by remaining mute. But more to the point, Kingston here seems to imply that the fear of loss of sanity cannot or should not be replaced by a way of perceiving reality that dose not allow for multiple ways of existence. The 'American-Feminine' voice the narrator has adopted fails to do justice to the complexity of her own experience, as exemplified by the episode with the mother.

The young narrator decides to confess her "guilt list" of over two hundred things to Brave Orchid, desiring her mother to identify with her: "she (mother) would become more like me, and I would never be alone again" (1996: 198). But the mother finds the incoherent mumbling a nuisance. Exasperated with her mother, the narrator later retaliates by protesting " I am not going to be a slave or a wife" (1996: 201). But what is remarkable in this outburst is the narrator's criticism of her mother's story-telling " they (stories) have no logic...I can't tell what's real and what you makeup" (1996: 202). Despite this protest the narrator does exactly what her mother does; her memoir ultimately **is** a fusion of the real and the imagined. Is this then Kingston's alternative to both "silence" and the 'American-Feminine' voice? As Brave Orchid says, was the narrator's tongue cut to enable her to speak in different voices? I believe that Kingston finally envisions a heterogeneous voice and perception as empowering. For despite her imaginative extravagance it is Brave Orchid, like Kingston and her narrator who survive the diasporic experience. Those like Moon Orchid (narrator's aunt) and several other

women in the neighborhood, who could not express the complexity of their experiences, suffer insanity and premature death.

Kingston has maintained this position as empowering, even beyond the text - "so I guess I do play with the idea of appetite for order and disorder, or an appetite for more stories. And yes, I do see the ability to see variety, complexity as being sane" (Meachen & Williams, 1996; 01). Her celebration of an almost schizophrenic perception, which shatters the distinction between reality and fantasy, as a state of sanity, is interesting. Feminist critics have interrogated women writing which have over the years monotonously exploited the genre of realism. In her discussion of what constitutes a **feminist text** Rosalind Coward examines nineteenth and twentieth century women writing and demonstrates how in women 's narratives, the woman protagonist's process of 'becoming her own person' is ultimately defined by sexual or romantic experiences . And the 'voice' of the central protagonist, Coward argues, frequently offers itself as 'representative' of women in general:

> Often though, the convention itself pulls the novels back into banal repetitions, asserting a world without fantasy where women struggle on, often grim, brutalized and victimized. I am not sure that becoming my own person is sufficient compensation for such a world (Coward, 1989: 47).

Critics like Felman and Suleri who problematize the realist mode of narrativization have protested the hegemony exerted by the realist tradition and the realist critic. Citing realism as a product of dominant Western cultural practices, Suleri establishes the need for an alternative, 'if realism is the eurocentric pattern of adjudicating between disparate cultural and ethnic realities, then it is surely the task of radical feminism to provide an alternative perspective' (1994: 250). Despite its strong critique of realism, Suleri's essay however does not suggest any alternative.

Coward on the other hand suggests an alternative way of reading women's writing. She urges the reader to look beyond narrative content which she has already established as largely confined to a general pattern of attaining sexual knowledge, to the 'structures and effects' in women's narrativization (Coward, 1989: 226). In **The Woman Warrior,** which is after all a self-confessed memoir, the constant fluctuating between the real and the mythical, the blurring of reality and fantasy serve as modalities of narrativization which pull the carpet of reader comfort from underneath the reader's feet. The reader is plunged into taking up reading practices that Felman argues should lead to something other than 'recognition,' 'normalization' and 'cure' (1989: 152).

3. Who is "ethnic"? : Minority identities

A major motif in Kingston's text seems to be the narrator's attempt to reconcile with her bicultural identity. Quite early in the text she asks,

> Chinese Americans, when you try to understand what things in you are Chinese, how do you separate what is peculiar to childhood, to poverty, insanities, one family, from what is Chinese? What is Chinese tradition and what is in the movies? (Kingston, 1996: 06).

The narrator reaffirms the ambivalence in her experience by admitting that to her parents generation, she and her siblings, like the other Americans are "ghosts" (1996: 167). But she also manipulates the term "ghost" to demonstrate the impossibility of appropriating binary oppositions to cultural experiences. Brave Orchid regards the narrator as a ghost because she thinks her daughter lacks memory. But in writing this text, which is after all a memoir, is not the writer contesting the cultural meaning given to the term? She further problematizes this when she justifies her decision to distance herself from the emigrant village, "I've found some places in this country that are ghost free. And I think that I belong there" (1996: 108). The ghosts here are no longer only the Americans but it could be virtually anyone. The distinctions are no longer concrete but nebulous.

Similarly in her conclusion of the episode on the warrior woman, Kingston establishes that the swordswoman and she are not so dissimilar after all. She sees the warrior woman and her agenda as the same: "what we have in common are the words at our backs. The reporting is the vengeance-not the beheading, not by the gutting, but the words" (1996: 53). She urges "her people" to realize this soon "may my people understand the resemblance soon so that I can return to them." (1996: 53). But the "people" here whom she identifies with and desires acceptance from are not merely the Chinese Americans. In an interview Kingston addresses this issue:

> I'm having so much fun with the pronouns "we" and "our." When I say "my people and "our people," I mean everybody. And I watch other people think that I mean Chinese people or Chinese American people or Asian American people or women. But, more and more, I'm spreading the meaning to mean every human being (Meanchen & Williams, 1996: 05).

One wonders whether Kingston is experimenting with a cosmopolitan cultural identity as a possible alternative to the gendering of race. But if such a cultivated detachment is suggested as a desirable model the narrator is only too acutely aware that it is indeed shrouded in romantic visions, for she admits that China still wraps its double bind around her feet (Kingston, 1996:48). And Kingston continues to challenge and redefine her ethnic American identity, yet American nevertheless, in her more recent writings,

> I have been thinking that we ought to leave out the hyphen in "Chinese-American," because the hyphen gives the word on either side equal weight, as if linking two nouns. It looks as if a Chinese-American is double citizenship, which is impossible in today's world. Without the hyphen, "Chinese" is an adjective and "American" a noun; a Chinese American is a type of American. Not Chinese- American. (Kingston, 1998: 10).

Even though it is possible to interrogate Kingston's flirtations with different models of cultural identity, the text cannot be simply dismissed as a naïve, over simplified glorification of cosmopolitanism. In her essay 'Cultural Mis-Readings by American Reviewers' (1998) Kingston protests against the American critical establishment. She complains that mainstream American critics have exploited her Chinese subject matter to appropriate Western conceptions of the 'exotic other' (1998: 9). I would like to argue that ***The Woman Warrior*** establishes that to search for an authentic "other" would be indeed futile. The text demonstrates the irreducible plurality of women's experience and explores the complex task of representation. Here it would be appropriate to recall how ***The Woman Warrior***

demonstrates the impossibility of capturing a monolithic image of China, through the various re/presentations of the country. The real China emerges to be different from what the emigrants have told the narrator. And finally, even as the narrator shreds the extremely critical tone she had previously adopted and moves towards a rather unsettling romanticization of China[3] the reader is implicitly warned. The "real China" is not the country of emigrant tales- where despotic communists are perennially torturing the people - nor is it the liberal haven of the adult narrator's imagination. The real China then is not a specimen to be appropriated as an authentic other, because China, like every "other" she attempts to re/present, is not a monolithic domain, waiting to be defined.

4. Conclusion

The critique of western feminism's flight from the non-white feminine presence by refusing to recognize that non-white and female identity could co-exist, has been consistently and urgently forthcoming from African American Feminist writers. But at the same time, they have also protested against Black feminist critics for what is seen as their failure to develop a consistent feminist analysis to write about Black or Black lesbian texts (Smith, 1985: 168). As refreshing as it is, Barbara Smith's demand for a distinct Black and Black lesbian feminist analysis, also exemplifies the unresolved tensions in contemporary feminism. At one point in her essay Smith seems to adopt the stance of advocating a purely Black feminist theory, by implying that in order to qualify, the critic herself should necessarily be a Black woman. However, at another point she unquestioningly advocates the application of White feminist literary ethics to dissect Black lesbian writing. Despite these tensions the essay develops a case for a Black feminist literary tradition and argues against an amalgamation with mainstream feminism.

But African American feminist critics like Bell Hooks have been wary of such separatist theoretical positions. Hooks responded to this problematic by advocating the need for a heterogeneous feminism, which recognizes and confronts its own underlining assumptions of sexism **and** racism (Hooks, 2000). But she also admits that though many feminists have incorporated analysis of race into recent feminist scholarship, these insights have not had as much impact on creating dialogues among women of different racial backgrounds. So how would current feminist theories reconcile with these diverse voices? We have already established that representation by women writers who have an 'authentic' claim to do so, vis-à-vis their own sexual and racial affinities, is not necessarily a 'solution'. As Suleri so finely puts it:

> (T)his points to the great difficulty posited by the 'authenticity' of female racial voices in the great game that claims to be the first narrative of what the ethnically constructed woman is deemed to want (1994: 247).

If the Village Crazy Lady in **The Woman Warrior** (Kingston, 1996:94-95) who is removed from reality, and thereby suffers a violent death at the hands of the villagers in China, allegorically represents the plight of the minority (ethnic American) writer in the west, Kingston seems to call for a revision of the notion of

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[3] The narrator fleetingly engages in a problematic and abrupt valorization of china, "May the Communists light up the house on a girl's birthday" (Kingston, 1996:191).

'authenticity'. To develop an authentic voice, a mere superficial identification with the relevant groups is futile. What is needed, Kingston demonstrates, is a willingness to experiment with literary strategies that could do justice to the multiplicity of reality. I would like to argue that by retelling the same story in different ways, by amalgamating the real with the mythical and imagined, by refusing to adhere to a linear narrative, **The Woman Warrior** departs from the realistic narrative mode. By exploring an alternative narrative strategy which legitimizes the multiplicity in human existence, the text on the one hand provides a possibility to locate feminist intent beyond its content, and on the other disrupts the authoritative version of romanticizing the minority condition. In doing so, Kingston finally demonstrates the inadequacy of binary perceptions of the world, which presuppose meaning into human experiences.

By claiming that **The Woman Warrior** is an American novel and she is an American writer desiring to write the *great American novel* (Meachen & Williams, 1996:1) is Kingston obliquely demanding a radical redefinition of the American literary canon? Where the woman warrior fought in the battlefield to restore patriarchal honor with her body of engraved words, Maxine Hong Kingston's narrative strives to protest against patriarchal and racist definitions of literary practice and minority subjectivities.

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