

Breaking Silence for Cultural Integration

—An Analysis on *The Woman Warrior* from the angle of power of discourse

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Keywords: power of discourse, silence, madness, cultural integration

Abstract: *Woman Warrior* is Maxine Hong Kingston's first famous book. Through her own experiences and fantasies, Kingston demonstrates a frustrated and struggling world of Chinese-Americans. In the alien cultural environment, many can not fit the differentiation and become silent and mad. Still some try to struggle in their own ways, power of discourse help them get the identity and integrate into the culture of American society.

1. Introduction

Maxine Hong Kingston, among the second generation of Chinese-American, was born on October 27, 1940 in Stockton, California. She grew up surrounded by other immigrants from her father's village, and the storytelling she heard as a child influenced her later writing. In 1962, she graduated from the University of California at Berkeley with a B.A. degree in English literature. After that, she began her teaching career. Her first book, *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts*(1976), won the National Book Critic's Circle Award and made her a literary celebrity at the age of 36. Kingston has since written two other critically hailed books. *China Men*(1980), and *Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book*(1989).

Kingston strove for a Chinese rhythm to her voice, a typical Chinese-American speech, and rich imagery; her first book was a great success. In the memoir, Kingston writes of the conflicting cultural messages she received as the daughter of Chinese immigrants growing up in the America of the 1950s. The book also tells the story of the generations of Chinese women that preceded her and the weight she felt as an American trying to emerge from their sometimes stifling presence. In the end of *Woman Warrior*, her shy girl character finds resolution as she breaks female silence and inherits an oral tradition that she carries on as a written tradition. The subtitle of the book, *Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts*, suggests the book's almost fantastic tone, but also refers specifically to the ghosts of Kingston's female relatives and the tragedy of many of their lives.

Though Kingston claims elsewhere that she does not want her memoir to be “representative”, it is clear that she is also reaching out to other Chinese-Americans who share her feelings of displacement and frustration. Breaking silence or not leads to great difference in the immigrants' fates. In the following parts of my essay, I will discuss the importance of articulation in fashioning one's identity through different fates of Chinese female immigrants in the cultural conflict from the angle of power of discourse.

2. Discourse and power of discourse

The term “discourse” has long been used casually by literary critics, “especially in application to passages representing conversations between characters in a literary work, and in the 1970s there developed a critical practice called *discourse-analysis* which focuses on such conversational exchanges. This type of criticism deals with literary discourse as conducted by human characters whose voices engage in a dynamic interchange of beliefs, attitudes, sentiments, and other expressions of states of consciousness.”^① Therefore, both Brave Orchid's spoken words and Kingston's written words can be called discourse, although they are in different forms. They attempt to establish their power of discourse, fashion their identities, and speak out their actions.

Michel Foucault, the famous French philosopher and historian, explores “the ways power and knowledge are connected in the production of subjectivity and identity in terms of ‘discourse’...”^② Foucault observes that discourse is power, and the two are connected closely that can not be parted. Discourse is a manifestation of power, and all the power is realized by discourse. The one who grasps discourse means the grasp of power of discourse to establish an identity.

In *Woman Warrior*, Kingston emphasizes again and again the importance of articulation. Finding one’s voice and telling one’s stories represent power. Just as having one’s stories bearing its power, the result of her trying, instead of confusion and humiliation about her Chinese background, she feels triumphed, she now finds in the stories and customs that set her apart from American classmates. She finds her heritage and treasure, her strength and identity.

3. Chinese female immigrants use power of discourse to identify themselves in America

3.1 Power of Brave Orchid’s spoken words

In many ways Brave Orchid is a representative of the emigrant Chinese, who fiercely guard the customs and traditions of their people and consider all Americans to be “ghosts” on the outside. The emigrant Chinese attitude to the American-born Chinese—their own sons and daughters—comes across as a mixture of fear, resentment, and disappointment. She used her words as a weapon to defeat the ghosts in China. She told ghost stories to her children. For example, when the sitting ghost was trying to do her the intended rape, she said in this way: “You will not win, Boulder. You do not belong here. And I will see to it that you leave. When morning comes, only one of us will control this room, Ghost, and that one will be me.” “I do not give in.... You are no more dangerous than a nesting cat.” “Yes, when I get my oil, I will fry you for breakfast.” The fight between Brave Orchid and the Sitting Ghost ended in triumph: “she then ignored the ghost on her chest and chanted her lessons for the next day’s classes. The moon moved from one window to the other, and as dawn came, the thing scurried off, climbing quickly down the foot of the bed.”

The ghost stories are just a demonstration of the function of Brave Orchid’s words as a weapon. However, she also finds some psychological consolation in excellent Chinese culture and tells stories to her next generation such as Fa Mu Lan, Yue Fei and T’sai Yan, although they are mingled with western stories, myths or legends by her children. She also talks stories of herself on how she went to Midwifery School and became a village doctor, how she came over by ship to America and found her husband, how she struggle through the shackles of Chinese traditional and western culture to explore a new area of life, how she play an important role as a spiritual support and a major labour force in a family, how she lived optimistically and indomitably in adversity and predicament. Brave Orchid’s faith in life and her ability of endurance in front of difficulties justify that she is an overmatch in life. Therefore, Brave Orchid uses words to release her perplexity of identity. She had meant to return to China when one day she would have been rich. This is also a dream of many other Chinese immigrants. But after more than thirty years’ living in America, and after they have finally given away the land back in China and that she must resign herself living in America. She finally agreed that her daughter’s words are right: “We belong to the same planet now, Mama. Does it make sense to you that if we’re no longer attached to one piece of land, we belong to the planet? Wherever we happen to be standing, why, that spot belongs to us as much as any other spot.” Struggling to comprehend her daughter’s meaning, Brave Orchid seems to have forgotten that while she was waiting for the Sitting Ghost to appear, she herself voiced a similar thought in relation to the moon and stars: “‘That is the same moon that they see in New Society Village,’ she thought, ‘the same stars’.” And, in the parenthetical sentence directly following Brave Orchid’s thought, Kingston notes that growing up, she heard her mother similarly say, “That is the same moon that they see in China, the same stars though shifted a little.” After such a long time struggle in America, she become the first generation of woman warrior and defined herself as a Chinese-American at last.

3.2 Power of Kingston's written words

Maxine Hong Kingston tacitly acknowledges that she owes her creative abilities to her mother, Brave Orchid, whose talk-stories are the impetus for her own power of language as a woman warrior. "My mother is the creative one — the one with the visions and the stories to tell. I'm the technician. She's the great inspiration. I never realized it until I finished the book."^③ Instead of talking stories, Maxine Hong Kingston takes writing as a way of survival in America as a representative of the second generation of Chinese immigrant. For her, writing has been central in her life. "I began writing when I was nine.... I was in fourth grade and all of a sudden this poem started coming out of me. On and on I went, oblivious to everything, and when it was over I had written 30 verses. It is a bad habit that doesn't go away."^④ "My writing is an ongoing function, like breathing or eating," she explains. "I have this habit of writing things down. Anything. And then some of it falls into place as in these two books [*China Men* and *Woman Warrior*]"^⑤. She admires the changes a storyteller can implement when he or she tells the same tale many times, and in her work, she tries to retain this freedom to change a story's interpretation by guarding ambiguity in the static writing. Doubt is a part of every story, not certainty, and that is part of what makes her writing unique.

The image of Fa Mu Lan in Chapter Two shows clearly the heroism and rebellious spirit of Chinese ancient female. Compared with Chinese traditional Mu Lan, the one in *Woman Warrior* is different in Kingston's imaginations and fantasies. The previous one highlights filial duty of Confucianism, indifference to utility, spirit of self-importance. While the latter one appears as a volunteered revolutionist. Her purpose of being an army member is not to serve the emperor but to revenge for her villagers and finally killed those barbarians, bandits and thieves. The "list of grievances" at her back and Fa Mu Lan's actions to fight and have a baby implied that the only way to be a woman warrior and gain her identity is to become a rebellious female. In the meantime, she comprehended from her mother the Chinese characteristics such as hardworking and endurance, braveness and perseverance. However, she still faces a problem of reality: Will the Fa Mu Lan story work in America? Will the heritage of Chinese traditional culture empower her in the new environment? Or will she just vanish with death of her mother's generation? She can not find answers from mother because mother insists stubbornly on Chinese traditional culture which can not meet the needs of times. Therefore, it becomes an urgency to fashion her identity and get rid of her weak position in the new culture. The Fa Mu Lan story expresses her earnest expectation to find a balance between two conflict cultures. She challenges the whole society and the cultural environment. Kingston states her argument from Fa Mu Lan's mouth: "I learned to make my mind large, as the universe is large, so that there is room for paradoxes." She will dispel the contradiction between the two cultures with her heroism, while not weakness, so that she can affirm her value and insignificance.

If the fantasy of Fa Mu Lan demonstrates Kingston's rebellious position, then another historical person, Ts'ai Yen, expresses her ideal of self-fashioning. Ts'ai Yen, born in A.D. 175, the daughter of a wealthy scholar-statesman, was a musician and a poetess. During a village raid in 195, she was captured by invading Souther Hsiung-nu, whose chieftain made her his wife. For twelve years, she lived with these "barbarians" in the desert, and she even bore two children by the chieftain. Whenever the children's father would leave the family tent, Ts'ai Yen would talk and sing in Chinese to her children. Eventually, she was ransomed and returned to her family so that she could remarry and produce Han—Chinese—descendants. Ts'ai Yen kept her tradition of Han Dynasty and tried hard to get used to the new environment with an optimistic attitude. All this means that she is to dispel the conflict between two cultures with a certain compromise or expediency. Ts'ai Yen's story is the tale of Brave Orchid. She finds herself hostage in the barbarian land of America. Her children are like Ts'ai Yen's children who can not understand her. But the meaning of this story does not end here. The tale is at the same time the tale of Kingston herself, because her sense of alienation is doubly complicated. As a product of two cultures, she remains outside the circle of both cultures. Mother and daughter sing the songs of sadness, loneliness and displacement, finding

their common sustenance in the world through telling stories. But through her story telling, Kingston can create the total identification of mother and daughter as they both become Ts'ai Yen, women poets.

4. Silence and Madness

4.1 Chinese tradition implanted women with silence

Instead of grasping the power of discourse, the loss of voice will cause disaster of life and even lead to madness. Women's silence has a long history in the patriarchal society, especially in old China. Women began to learn rites and rules of women at very early age. They were taught to be slaves, to be silent. On the one hand, silence is a sign of obedience. On the other hand, silence is a reflection of uncertainty of one's identity and position. The loss of discourse allows no women to represent themselves. They are forced to accept the ideas of patriarchal society and the discourse represented by men. The implant or education of gender results in oppression to women themselves. Silence is deeply extended in minority works, such as in *Woman Warrior*. It is also a real social situation of Chinese female immigrants, and this social situation constructs the background of Moon Orchid.

In the late 19th century and early 20th century, many Chinese immigrants went to America for wealth and left their wives who would have to stay and wait them back. "In 1924 just a few days after our village celebrated seventeen hurry-up weddings-to make sure that every young man who went out 'on the road' would responsibly come home...All of them sent money home." For many years, they didn't return. "The heavy, deep-rooted women were to maintain the past against the flood, safe for returning." "The work of preservation demands that the feelings playing about in one's gut not be turned into action. Just watch their passing like cherry blossoms...let dreams grow and fade and after some months or years went toward what persisted." This designation centering on men excludes women's need for love. And the tradition of silence shut women from fighting against it.

In Chapter Four, At the Western Palace, daughter (Kingston) shows us a soft, obedient, quiet and weak Moon Orchid through contrasting against Brave Orchid and her daughters born in America. Compared with her nieces, Moon Orchid's self is a nothing. Her existence is reduced to a shadow, an echo. She keeps silent after being abandoned by husband for thirty years. "But she had never told him that she wanted to come to the United States. She waited for him to suggest it, but he never did." When she knew that he had married another beautiful young American girl, she did not protest against it, but took it for granted that she was the "big wife" according to the deep-rooted Chinese tradition. She brought up their daughter on her own, but she felt grateful to the absent father only because he was sending money and sent their daughter to college. With the help of Brave Orchid, Moon Orchid sold her apartment in Hong Kong and came to America at the age of 67. She didn't realize her subversive action but suppressed her needs and wishes by speaking for him. "I shouldn't be here...Do you think he'll get angry at me because I came without telling him?" "He didn't abandon me. He's given me so much money. I've had all the food and clothes and servants I've ever wanted. And he's supported our daughter too, even thought she's only a girl. He sent her to college. I can't bother him. I mustn't bother him." Here we can see that the poor woman has made silence a part of her body. When she finally met her husband, she was still silent. All she did was open and shut her mouth without any words coming out when he said "You...What are you doing here?" Even her cry was stopped by his wide open staring eyes. "It's a mistake for you to be here. You can't belong. You don't have the hardness for this country. I have a new life." He went on to humiliate her and put all the responsibilities to her side. "Look at her. She'd never fit into an American household. I have important American guests who come inside my house to eat...You can't talk to them. You can barely talk to me...I do not want her in my house...You became people in a book I had read a long time ago." In front of these humiliations, Moon Orchid didn't defend but strengthen her self-condemnation. She "was so ashamed, she held her hands over her face. She wished she could also hide her dappled hands." The big contrast between silence and reality pushed

her to greater contradiction. She has always believed that she is big wife no matter how many wives he has. But husband's words turn her into a fairy tale figure. She becomes scared for being abandoned again by husband, and was afraid of family members' leaving from her. She goes insane. She loses her identity which she has agreed on for many years. Her soul becomes vanishing. Though insane, she finds her new identity as a mother in the mental asylum. She began to make up a new story.

It is not Moon Orchid's husband, but the silence stressed by patriarchal society that makes her insane. The silence is so destructive the she has to experience a struggle that is greater than her endurance. This silence is so oppressive that their inner-self experiences an uncontainable struggle between what is "moral", "normal", "intelligible", and what is their inarticulate reality. And the different degrees of self-denial that it produces end in madness.

4.2 The alien culture and language environment make them mad

Moon Orchid's madness is caused not only by the tradition of patriarchal society and her husband's abundance, but as Kingston has pointed out, by the alien culture and language environment. In *The Divided Self: An Existential Study in Sanity and Madness*, Laing observes that the uncomfortable individual encloses "true-self" into "false-self" because he/she can not apply to the real world that is full of dangers. Slowly, spirit and body lose their normal integration. In this case, the only consolation is self-fantasy, which leads to the more separation of spirit and body. Thus schizophrenia and break-down follows. The traditional moon Orchid was trapped in a totally strange world of strange ideas, actions, habits and language. When she was refused by husband, she felt more and more solitary and unfamiliar to the strange environment. She was always worrying about being traced and caught by Mexicans, about family members' leaving.

There are other insane figures in the book, such as the woman who invited children to the "sky movie", Crazy Mary and the witch woman Pee-A-Nah in Chapter Five. They were all healthy in mind but became insane in America. The great distance between eastern and western cultures is root for the twist and separation of their characters and ideas. They lose their life root and become aliens to the outside world of America. They suffered from severe pressures and tortures in humanity. The feeling of pessimism and disillusion rise abruptly in mind. That contributes to a misery and ill "self".

Many experts recognize that the eastern and western cultivations can be compatible with and beneficial to each other. However, the split-up and integration of different cultures need corresponding premises and conditions. If the social conditions are not ready for them or have some side effects to them, collisions and contradictions between different cultures will take place. The majority of early Chinese immigrants were not educated formally. Chinese culture represented by them was not welcome and recognized owing to their comparatively low economic basis and social position. On the other hand, most were here in America to get gold and wealth, and then came back China to glorify their forefathers. They were also object to American culture and ideas subjectively. The author vividly describes the immigrants' tragedy when struggling in the collision of Chinese and American cultures and ideas. She also illustrates her determination to break through cultural restraints. To live a steady and orderly life in this alien environment, Chinese immigrants should integrate and balance Chinese subjective culture and American objective culture organically. Only in this way, they can refashion themselves, break through cultural knots and live as equally as and as dignified as other Americans.

Through these insane images, we can see Kingston's hope: national communication and cultural integration. Being the second generation of Chinese-American, she is immersed in a cultural dilemma. Her book is an alien text to American and Chinese as well. Both the cultures are defamiliarized codes and integration of contradictions. Instead of binary opposite, she suggests dispersal of the two cultures and attempt new artistic technique. She challenges traditional authority of culture, and hopes to reject mainstream culture and establish a trend of multi-cultures.

In *Woman Warrior*, Kingston mingled and patched eastern and western cultures with her special style. She transplants and transforms classics, myths and legends. She takes Defoe's *Robinson*

Crusoe as a Chinese story; describes Fa Mu Lan in the mountain as Alice in the *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*; transplants Yue Fei's story into the Fa Mu Lan story; and transforms the American opinion about sex to the character Fa Mu Lan. The writing technique such as transplant and transform is Kingston's creation in promoting cultural integration. It also reflects her opinions of value. In the multicultural society of America, the shock and misery brought by cultural collision help her realize that only equal and harmonious communication can make the two cultures be beneficial to each other.

5. Conclusion

Chinese women have been silent for thousands of years in the patriarchal society. They have experienced lots of tragedies since being bounded by traditional rites and rules. However, they have to handle the cultural conflict in America. When the struggle is greater than their endurance, they become insane. Moon Orchid is an example. Only those with sufficient willpower and intelligence can break the silence and fashion themselves in the new cultural environment. To grasp the power of discourse is to gain the power to establish one's identity. Both Maxine Hong Kingston and Brave Orchid are woman warriors who articulate their stories in forms of talking and writing. They break silence and look for the cultural integration and finally find their identity as Chinese-American.

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