"Empowerment through Mythological Imaginings in Woman Warrior"

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In the following essay, Johnston explores Kingston's use of myth in The Woman Warrior.

In The Woman Warrior, Maxine Hong Kingston explores the relation between a mythic, three-dimensional reality represented by China of the mind, and a flat literal reality equated with America. In its exploration of the shifting line between history and memory, fiction and nonfiction, dream and fact, Kingston challenges western rational ways of seeing, classifying, ordering. Indeed, the very difficulty of categorizing Kingston's work (fictive autobiography?) may cause us to question the very notion of categories, the dichotomous classifications upon which our systems of logic depend. French feminist critics have reminded us of the subversive potential of new ways of saying: "To put discourse into question is to reject the existing order." It means choosing marginality (with an emphasis on the margins) in order to designate one's difference, a difference no longer conceived of as an inverted image or double, but as alterity, multiplicity, heterogeneity" [Josette Feral, "The Powers of Difference," in The Future of Difference, edited by Hester Eisenstein and Alice Jardine, 1980]. By laying claim to her own language, her own voice, Kingston refuses the role of racial or sexual Other and invents herself as speaking subject. While dramatizing the movement from silence to articulation, she may appear to be moving away from her roots in the Chinese and Chinese-American tradition, moving toward an essentially American "logic" that seems a necessary part of her American success. In actuality, however, she synthesizes her own idiolect, an intensely personal language neither Chinese nor American, nor simply Chinese-American, but a way of seeing that draws from, and challenges, all the traditions she has inherited. Chinese myth and tradition, western literary styles and American popular culture--all are the raw material for Kingston's alchemical imagination.

In Kingston's world, east and west, like yin and yang, female and male, define themselves against each other. The American reader of Woman Warrior who sees her own culture from the vantage point of a marginal outsider may also look at the Chinese society and see her own culture in a glass darkly. For both Chinese and American cultures have this in common: both seek to contain or nullify the Other, the different, the female. Yet the misogynist Chinese traditional culture is itself objectified as Other by the dominant American culture in which it struggles to define itself. Furthermore, especially seen within the context of American culture, the qualities of Chinese culture which we symbolically associate with femininity are highlighted. If we define the word "feminine" in a broader sense than the biologically restrictive word "female," if we regard it in its connotative sense, as a way of seeing that focuses upon the intuitive, emotional, and symbolic, America's antipathy toward the feminine is seen as more soul-destroying than traditional Chinese misogyny. Kingston's America, in the name of efficiency and individualism, sacrifices the kinds of ambiguity, paradox, metaphor, and relationship that is the essence of Kingston's poetic vision. In juxtaposing American and Chinese ways of seeing, Kingston reveals to us the inadequacy of the masculine "Logos" deified in Western culture. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God," begins John's gospel. For the author of Woman Warrior, as for other Chinese girls, the beginning is not a masculine Logos, but the mother's talk story. Although she rails against her mother for telling confusing stories with no clear line between truth and falsehood, we cannot help but observe that her memoirs are modeled upon her mother's talk story, in style, structure, and content. At the very moment she seems to be lashing out at her mother, and boasting of her American successes, an irony becomes apparent. Brave Orchid's stories are the richest heritage she has bequeathed her daughter--not for the social prescriptions they embody, but for the habit of poetic seeing they have instilled. As transmitter of Chinese tradition. Brave Orchid gives a double message, saying that she will "grow
up a wife and a slave" but teaching "the song of the warrior woman." Just as the China which
oppresses women also teaches that women can be "heroines, swordswomen," Kingston's mother too
is a "confounding contradiction" [Linda Morante, "From Silence to Song: The Triumph of Maxine
Hong Kingston," Frontiers, Vol. 9, No. 2, 1987]. Even her unlikely name, Brave Orchid, connotes
the paradox of masculine courage in a delicate feminine flower. Her mother attempts to silence her;
yet the effort of overcoming silence makes Kingston's story. The fantasy that the frenum of her
tongue has been cut by the mother reflects the ambivalence the girl Kingston reveals toward her
mother. Perhaps Kingston's mother meant to silence her by cutting her tongue; then again, perhaps
she meant to free her, to cut her tongue loose. "I cut it so that you would not be tongue-tied. Your
tongue would be able to move in any language. You'll be able to speak languages that are
completely different from one another. You'll be able to pronounce anything. Your frenum locked
too tight to do those things, so I cut it." It is her mother who, by giving her the talk story, also gives
her the mythos of who she is and where she came from.

What the girl Kingston absorbs from the talk stories is not necessarily what Brave Orchid intends
on a conscious level. Stories like that of the no-name Aunt, for instance, are clearly admonitory,
illustrating what dire consequences await the female who is a sexual maverick. Yet the conspiracy
of silence surrounding this woman calls up in the girl Kingston imaginative forays into a Chinese
village far away in time and space, into the mind of this unnamed aunt, into a tutelary identification
with her. The whispered story of this outcast aunt haunts the author, who writes into it what she
wants, needs to believe. "Unless I see her life branching into mine, she gives me no ancestral help."
She makes of her an implausible romantic; she makes of her a complying victim to the man. In the
end, she images her aunt not as victim, but as one who, like another rape victim--Ts'ai Yen--on one
level triumphs over victimization. The no name aunt acts: she shows love for her baby by drowning
it. She has the last silent word; by drowning herself in the drinking water she has revenged herself
on the community which condemned her; a "spite suicide," a "weeping ghost," she waits later by
the well to pull in a substitute. In hearing this talk story, Kingston listened for metamessages of
power in the most seemingly hopeless situation. Like Ovid's raped and silenced Philomela,
Kingston's no-name aunt finds, as a hungry, haunting ghost, the dark power of revenge in a
seemingly hopeless situation.

Like her no name aunt, Kingston too breaks rules. Simply by revealing the scandal of the aunt,
Kingston is betraying a confidence, breaking the mother's command to silence. "You must not tell
anyone & what I am about to tell you." This memoir, which is so deeply personal in its content, is
political in its import. Just as the speaking out of a caterpillar or a playing card in Alice in
Wonderland unsettles any a priori expectations we may have about how animals and things behave,
the speaking out of a Chinese-American female overturns our assumptions about the quiet, passive
nature of Chinese-American females. The autobiographical act is potentially subversive in a
communal tradition which commands filial duty, family and clan loyalty, female silence: it is also
subversive in the context of a larger America.

Perhaps it is easier, however for us to see, and accept revelations about Chinese-American culture
than about our own. The candor with which Kingston disarms us at the outset is deceptive. At the
same time she wins our trust by establishing an intimate confidentiality she also fulfills her filial
duty by protecting or camouflaging the "truth." By suggesting alternate versions of what the aunt's
story might have been, she undercuts the usual autobiographical claim of verisimilitude. It is
significant that Kingston here merges the subjunctive and indicative moods, as throughout her
memoirs she will continue to flesh out, color and deliberately twist the stories she has heard "into
designs." By warming remembered, fragmentary, recounted stories in the caldron of her
imagination, Kingston undermines the very notion of nonfiction as documented, eye-witness
"truth"--a notion identified with scientific, western, masculine rationalism.
Kingston’s memoir questions the line between fiction and non-fiction, examines the relation of poetry to prose. It does this by way of metaphor. It contrasts what Alexis de Tocqueville once referred to as the "anti-poetic" life in the United States with imaginative and mythical habits of thought represented by China. For all its associations with the deformed, with a misogynist tradition, with maddening indirectness, China is the land of rich and fertile myth; in contrast, American rationalism, which explains an eclipse of the sun scientifically rather than as the "frog-swallowing the moon" seems poverty stricken. Learning the American outlook means learning to see surfaces rather than depths, explanations rather than mysteries. "Now colors are gentler and fewer; smells are antiseptic. Now when I peek in the basement window where the villagers say they see a girl dancing like a bottle imp, I can no longer see a spirit in a skirt made of light, but a voiceless girl dancing when she thought no one was looking." The ability to see spirit, light made visible, is something lost not only with growing up, but with moving away from her Chinese world into the American one. The Chinese secrecy which exasperates her at times also lends itself to rich nuance in a way that American directness does not. Chinese is the language of dreams and impossible stories, of metaphor and paradox. In America, "Things follow in lines at school. They take stories and teach us to turn them into essays." American schools, with their neatly formulated essays rather than open-ended stories, are the repository of American values. The American Teacher Ghosts recognize her talent by saying she "could be a scientist or mathematician"--two possibilities for which she seems precisely unsuited. She in turn grabs at other, equally unlikely occupational possibilities: "I want to be a lumberjack and a reporter." With her slight physique and her bookish propensities, Kingston is clearly not telling a literal "truth" in this "truthful" confrontation with her mother, but an imaginative one. What Kingston is really saying is that she will not be hemmed in by convention. The image of the lumberjack, like the image of the woman warrior, is a romantic one, but what is strikingly incongruous about this image is its gender. Ironically, it is tradition-bound China which provides the romantic myth of a female warrior while America offers a practical career alternative for girls. "'Learn to type if you want to be an American girl,'" advises Brave Orchid. We must realize that when Kingston says "Give me plastic, periodical tables, TV dinners with vegetables no more complex than peas mixed with diced carrots" she is really saying the opposite, as the mother has indicated is the Chinese custom. Despite its readily apparent misogyny, Chinese culture is seen to allow for mystery in a way that American reductiveness does not. In the story "White Tigers," Kingston learns, in the final stages of her training as a woman warrior, how to infer the immense, unknowable dragon from its parts. Like China, like the self whose story she tells, the dragon can never be seen "in its entirety"; understanding the dragon, like understanding a koan, requires a Chinese way of knowing--indirection, intuition, paradox. "The dragon lives in the sky, oceans, marshes, and mountains; and the mountains are also its cranium. Its voice thunders and jingles like copper pans. It breathes fire and water; and sometimes the dragon is one, sometimes many."

The paradox which is the dragon is the paradox of Kingston's China of the mind. Oppression as a female within the Chinese culture, and the double oppression of race and gender within America, is only part of the truth. Her ethnicity, her sex, and her special vantage point just outside two cultures, nourish the poetic vision that is her empowerment. Kingston has remarked upon how myth in the women's stories, unlike myth in the men's stories of China Men, is integrated into the warp and woof of the women's lives. "In The Woman Warrior, when the girls and women draw on mythology for their strengths, the myth becomes part of the women's lives and the structure of their stories" [Paula Rabinowitz, "Eccentric Memories: A Conversation with Maxine Hong Kingston," Michigan Quarterly Review, Vol. 36, No. 26, 1987]. On the surface China preaches a shrill misogynist message: "Girls are maggots in the rice!" The covert message, however, is different. Chinese-American girls learn silence as a survival tactic, but "Normal Chinese women's voices are strong and bossy. We American-Chinese girls had to whisper to make ourselves American-feminine." Ironically, it is the apparently more emancipated American culture that teaches Chinese-American females to subdue and modulate their voices.
Her experiences in both Chinese and American societies have fired her with anger--yet the enemies of capitalism, racism, sexism are far less tangible than the Sitting Ghost her mother wrestled with in China. She cannot direct her anger as the swordswoman does, and yet, if reporting is indeed vengeance, there is a sense in which her autobiographical act is too. Just as her mother burns out the Sitting Ghost with alcohol and oil, Kingston exorcises her demons through writing. Kingston uses her anger rather than allowing it to cripple her. In contrast, a witchwoman she remembers from childhood represents impotent female anger. The woman called Pee-A-Nah "was an angry witch, not a happy one. She was fierce; not a fairy, after all, but a demon." Kingston fears that she too may be a crazy outcast; she dreams of a vampire self. "Tears dripped from my eyes, but blood dripped from my fangs, blood of the people I was supposed to love." By writing her story, by breaking the silence enjoined upon her, Kingston may feel she betrays a trust, feeds on the life blood of her family and community. Yet the vampire is also a powerful figure, and Kingston's "report to five families" constitutes a powerful claim for recognition by Chinese and American societies.

Without denying the bitterness of the double oppression Kingston describes, we see that, through myth, she turns her oppression inside out. Like the ancient woman warrior Ts'ai Yen with whose story Kingston ends, cultural marginality has been turned to artistic advantage. Like Ts'ai Yen, Kingston has drawn from the Chinese and "barbarian" cultures she stands beside and between. The mythical Ts'ai Yen set her song of China to a song as high and clear as the barbarian flute music which haunted her in the desert. Kingston too has communicated an essentially Chinese way of seeing in an American idiom, and in the autobiographical process of self-creation, has won the admiration of the barbarians themselves.

Whether she is telling the story of her woman warrior's revenge, her mother's defeat of the sitting ghost, or the story of Ts'ai Yen, whose song reaches both barbarians and Chinese, Kingston shares with the reader the gift of seeing mythically rather than logically, a gift that is implicitly Chinese. The apparent powerlessness of the author's marginal status within American culture is curiously liberating. Confronted with cultural contradictions, Kingston's mind does not shatter like Moon Orchid's or Crazy Mary's; rather it stretches to accommodate the paradox it finds. Anger galvanizes not only the swordswoman, but the poet. As Nina Auerbach remarks within the context of Victorian culture, "Woman's freedom is no longer simple initiation into historical integrity, but the rebirth of mythic potential. The mythologies of the past have become stronger endowments than oppressions." As Kingston has demonstrated in her work, the woman, the minority writer, the artist, may, like the artist, lover, and lunatic, be of an imagination all compact. They may draw on the very myths which have been a historical instrument of oppression, teasing out new meaning through poetic reshaping. Like writers Toni Morrison and Leslie Silko, Kingston draws magic and aliveness from her ethnic rootedness, from her "connection with people who have a community and a tribe" (Rabinowitz).

SOURCE: