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"I Could Not Figure Out What Was My Village": Gender Vs. Ethnicity in Maxine Hong Kingston’s The Woman Warrior

Linda Hunt

Feminist theorists have argued about the extent to which women share a common culture. In Three Guineas Virginia Woolf has a character assert, “as a woman I have no country. . . . As a woman my country is the whole world.”¹ This has a fine ring to it, but if the sentiment were wholly true we would not find in women’s lives so much pain, confusion, and conflict. Temma Kaplan explains the complexity of the subject: “It is impossible to speak of ‘women’s culture’ without understanding its variation by class and ethnic group. Women’s culture, like popular or working class culture, must appear in the context of dominant cultures.”²

The truth of Kaplan’s statement is borne out by reading fiction and autobiography written by women from different backgrounds. Such books not only show the great cultural diversity women experience but also evoke the incompatible definitions of femininity and the irreconcilable demands a woman is likely to encounter as she attempts to live in more than one cultural world at the same time.

Women’s worlds may vary widely depending on ethnic background and social class, but in the societies from which we have written literature, male dominance is a common denominator.³ Maxine Hong Kingston’s autobiographical The Woman Warrior suggests that we need to pay attention to the contradictions male dominance creates for women who are at one and the same time subordinated by a culture, and yet, embroiled in its interstices; such women may be painfully at odds with themselves. A woman like Kingston, who is doubly marginal (i.e. not a member of the dominant race or class) is likely to feel this conflict with particular acuteness because an affiliation with a minority culture tends to be particularly strong.⁴

Explaining to the reader one of the many contradictions which are part of the legacy of her Chinese-American girlhood, Kingston comments bitterly, “Even now China wraps double binds around my feet.”⁵
The most difficult double-bind has been the need to reconcile her loyalty to her Chinese-American heritage, a background which devalues and even insults women, with her own sense of dignity as a female.

This paper is about Kingston’s attempt to resolve the war within herself, a struggle that is exacerbated by the tremendous emphasis Chinese culture puts on social cohesion. She has been raised to experience and require a powerful identification with family and community, and yet, as a woman, she cannot simply accept a place in a culture which calls people of her sex “maggots,” “broom and dustpan,” “slave.”

Maxine Hong Kingston’s personal struggle is fought — and resolved at least partially — on the battlefield of language. The words used against her sting, and, unable to find the right words and the right voice to express her own point of view, and indeed, unsure of that point of view, she is rendered nearly voiceless for much of her youth. She speaks inaudibly or in a quack, and once physically assaults another Chinese girl whose silence reminds her of her own. The core of the problem is that by being simultaneously insider (a person who identifies strongly with her cultural group) and outsider (deviant and rebel against that tradition), she cannot figure out from which perspective to speak. It is only through mastery of literary form and technique — through creating this autobiography out of family stories, Chinese myths, and her own memories — that she is able to articulate her own ambivalence and hereby find an authentic voice.

Kingston begins with an aunt back in China whose name the family tried to forget, telling her story in such a way that she artfully shifts point of view and sympathy in order to convey her divided loyalties. The aunt became an outsider to her village by getting pregnant while her husband was in America. The enraged villagers, terrified by her behavior, drove her to suicide: any lust not socially-sanctioned was seen as disruptive of the social order.

The author identifies with the rebellious aunt, whom she calls “my forerunner,” creating from her imagination various detailed scenarios, first of rape and then of romantic attraction, alternative versions of what might have happened, which are narrated in the omniscient third person. Kingston hypothesizes that her female relative might have succumbed to her impulses as relief from the burden of being “expected . . . alone to keep the traditional ways, which her brother now among the barbarians in America could fumble without detection” (p. 9). She expands on her theme, beginning to imagine in sensuous detail the pull that an attractive man might have had on this aunt “caught up in a slow life.”

But Kingston’s allegiance is abruptly withdrawn. Interrupting her
sensuous description of the imagined lover, the narrator exclaims, “She offered us up for a charm that vanished with tiredness, a pigtail that didn’t toss when the wind died” (p. 9, emphasis mine). The word “us” is startling because Kingston has abruptly shifted from third person to first person plural and from identification with the aunt, the outsider, to being one of the villagers, an insider.

The aunt’s story is resumed in a more objective vein, and we are given an explanation of the motives of the avengers of the social code:

The frightened villagers, who depend on one another to maintain the real, went for my aunt to show her a personal, physical representation of the break she had made in the “roundness.” . . . The villagers punished her for acting as if she could have a private life secret and apart from them. (p. 14)

While the remainder of the tale emphasizes the events which befell the persecuted woman, her thoughts and feelings, the narrative remains riddled with ambivalence. Kingston’s recounting of her aunt’s story has been a defiant act of recompense towards the forgotten relative, a desire not to participate in her punishment. Yet, one more twist occurs in the last sentence of the chapter:

My aunt haunts me. . . . I alone devote pages of paper to her. . . . I do not think she always means me well. I am telling on her, and she was a spite suicide, drowning herself in drinking water. (p. 19)

Suddenly the aunt is seen as an enemy, and Kingston’s own act in writing her story appears in a different light.

Kingston’s profound conflict about where her loyalty lies regarding the experience of this aunt she has never met serves to convey her own agonized indecision about what stance to take towards her own Chinese-American upbringing. If she identifies with the community, she must accept and even endorse her own humiliation at their hands; if she allows herself to fully experience the depths of her alienation, she is in danger of being cut off from her cultural roots. Thus she juxtaposes an exploration of the legend of Fa Mu Lan, a tale her story-telling mother used to chant, against the story of the outlaw aunt. The purpose is to test whether her culture’s myth about a heroic woman who defends her village will provide a way for Kingston to transcend the degrading female social role, and yet, be loyal to the community.

Kingston retells the story, casting herself as the swordswoman who through magic and self-discipline is trained to bring about social justice while at the same time fulfilling her domestic obligations. Significantly, a good part of her training involves exercises which teach her how to
create with her body the ideographs for various words: in Kingston’s universe it is through mastery of language that a warrior is created. Language is again important in that before Fa Mu Lan sets out, dressed as a man, to lead her male army against the enemies of her people, the family carves on her back the words which suggest their endless list of grievances.

When the narrator, Kingston’s fantasy of herself as Fa Mu Lan, returns home the villagers “make a legend about her perfect filiality” (p. 54). This myth, combining heroism and social duty as it does, is explored to see if winning the approval and admiration of the Chinese or Chinese-American community can provide so much gratification that Kingston will be persuaded to repress her injuries at the hands of the community. However, she subverts her own attempt by embedding within her tales of the female avenger certain elements which bring forth once again the theme of the injustices women suffer as a sex and the issue of female anger.

Hunting down the baron who had drafted her brother, she presents herself as defender of the village as a whole: “I want your life in payment for your crimes against the villagers.” But the baron tries to appeal to her “man to man,” lightly acknowledging his crimes against women in a misguided attempt at male-bonding:

Oh, come now. Everyone takes the girls when he can. The families are glad to get rid of them. “Girls are maggots in the rice. It is more profitable to raise geese than daughters.” He quoted to me the sayings I hated. (p. 51)

Since this version of the swordswoman’s story is Kingston’s own creation, she is surely introducing the baron’s sexism at this juncture to show the reader that, try as she does, she cannot simply overlook the patriarchal biases of Chinese culture. The enemy of her village seeks to create an alliance with the defender of family and community on the common ground of misogyny. No wonder Kingston exclaims just after the swordswoman’s tale is finished, “I could not figure out what was my village” (p. 54).

Even more subversively, in the process of spinning out her tale of the dutiful defender of the village, Kingston briefly indulges in a digression about a different kind of warrior woman. She has herself (the swordswoman) released from a locked room in the baron’s castle a group of “cowering, whimpering women.” These females who make “insect noises” and “blink weakly ... like pheasants that have been raised in the dark for soft meat” are utterly degraded:

The servant who walked the ladies had abandoned them, and they could
not escape on their little bound feet. Some crawled away from me, using their elbows to pull themselves along. These women would not be good for anything. I called the villagers to come identify any daughters they wanted to take home, but no one claimed any. (p. 53)

As creator, Kingston allows herself to respond with hostility to her own fantasy of the ultimate in female humiliation by turning these pathetic creatures into “witch amazons” who “killed men and boys.” Unlike Fa Mu Lan, who is impelled to be a warrior by idealism and disguises herself as a man, these women are mercenaries (i.e. self-interested), ride dressed as women (i.e. female-identified), and buy up girl babies from poor families; slave girls and daughters-in-law also run away to them. Kingston reveals her intense discomfort with this antisocial story she has used to deconstruct the socially-acceptable swords-woman myth by distancing herself from it. She falls into the conditional: “it would be said,” “people would say,” and concludes, “I myself never encountered such women and could not vouch for their reality” (p. 53).

Despite such subterfuges, the reader has not been allowed to forget that any Chinese woman who seeks to identify exclusively with the injustices experienced by the entire “village” at the hands of outsiders will be denying the damage she herself and others of her sex have suffered at the hands of outsiders and insiders alike. The term “female avenger” becomes ambiguous: can Kingston be satisfied with being an avenger who is a female or does she need to be the avenger of females?

Not ready to answer this question, Kingston uses the third and fourth chapters of The Woman Warrior to probe even further the implications of her culture’s sanctioned way for a woman to be strong. Brave Orchid, Kingston’s mother, has lived a life that conforms quite closely, within the limits of realistic possibility, to the woman warrior model. Left behind in China when her husband went off to America to improve the family’s fortunes, she entered medical school and became a doctor. Through rigorous self-discipline she triumphed not only over her studies but over a “sitting ghost” who serves as the symbolic embodiment of the fear and loneliness she must have experienced. “You have no power over a strong woman,” Brave Orchid asserts to the ghost.

After completing her studies Kingston’s mother returned home to serve her people as a practitioner of medicine. For some years she braved the terror of the dark woods as she went from village to village on her rounds as a physician. Like the swordswoman of the legend who returns from public life to do farmwork, housework, and produce sons, Brave Orchid accepted the next, more mundane, phase of her life without complaint; when summoned by her husband to the United States
she became his partner in a laundry and had six children (including the author) after the age of forty-five.

Kingston is being as fair as possible. Her mother’s story shows that the warrior woman model could work for some women. Proud of her past achievements, Brave Orchid has turned them into materials to draw on when she “talk-stories.” Yet Kingston follows the narrative of Brave Orchid with the experience of Moon Orchid, Brave Orchid’s sister, whose emigration to the United States leads to her madness and death. This aunt is not a strong person — and it is important that Kingston remind us that not all women have access to the remarkable reserves of strength and inflexible will that have served her mother. Also, Brave Orchid is responsible for her sister’s breakdown in that she insists that Moon Orchid aggressively pursue her Americanized and bigamously remarried husband. She assumes her sister’s husband and his second wife will accept their obligation to Moon Orchid since she is “Big Wife” (first wife), and bolsters Moon Orchid’s faith by reminding her of family stories from China in which the first wife had no difficulty reclaiming her position in the family after a lapse of time. Brave Orchid’s advice is dangerous because she is holding onto a myth of reality structured around laws and traditions that regulated marital interaction in China and offered some protection to women but which is useless in America. Thus Kingston reminds us that new situations require new myths. The warrior woman legend may have been the best Chinese society could offer her mother, but if she herself is to use it, fundamental modification will be necessary.

It is in the final chapter, “A Song For A Barbarian Reed Pipe,” that Kingston articulates most explicitly both her fury at her Chinese heritage and the strategies she has found for making peace with that heritage and salvaging from it what she can. She tells of how as a teenager she stored up in her mind a list of over two hundred truths about herself, bad thoughts and deeds to confess to her mother. When she tried to tell one item a day only to find Brave Orchid simply wasn’t interested, she “felt something alive tearing at [her] throat.”

Finally, one night when the family was having dinner at the laundry, her “throat burst open.” Instead of confessing her own disloyalty to family and Chinese tradition, Kingston found herself bitterly cataloguing her own numerous grievances:

When I said them out loud I saw that some of the items were ten years old already, and I had outgrown them. But they kept pouring out anyway in the voice of Chinese opera. I could hear the drums and the cymbals and the gongs and brass horns. (p. 236)
The transmutation of sins into grievances is significant: the fact that Kingston conceptualized these items first one way and then the other reveals again the ambivalence about whether she is insider or outsider which caused her muteness. This outburst is an important breakthrough in that she is impelled to make a choice, and choosing to identify as injured outsider frees her to speak. At this stage what she articulates with that newfound voice is the need to get away from the Chinese-American community: “I won’t let you turn me into a slave or a wife. I’m getting out of here. I can’t stand living here anymore” (p. 234).

At the same time, Kingston’s list of grievances is certainly an echo of the grievances the legendary swordsman had had carved on her back, the difference being that Fa Mu Lan’s list was not personal. Kingston’s autobiography becomes her way of being a woman warrior on her own behalf and perhaps on behalf of other Chinese girls and women. She had found a way to exact revenge against her background (one idiom for revenge being to “report a crime”) and yet to honor it. In crying out to the world about her culture’s mistreatment of women, she has in a sense taken on the warrior role her culture recommended to those of its women most capable of heroism. In finding a literary form and techniques which allow her to give voice to the conflicts and contradictions which almost silenced her, Maxine Hong Kingston is paying tribute to the importance her family and culture have always placed on the verbal imagination.

Kingston’s autobiographical masterpiece, with its theme of diverse cultural realities, reminds us to be careful about embracing a universal notion of what it means to be a woman. At the same time, however, the book raises the possibility that an important link not for all but for many women is the disjunction between female identity and the other aspects of cultural heritage. Agonizing contradictions between allegiance to gender and fidelity to some other dimension of one’s cultural background — and this might be race or class instead of or as well as ethnicity — may be a commonplace of the female experience. From an artistic point of view the result may be an anxiety of identity that is at least as debilitating as the “anxiety of authorship” that Susan Gubar and Sandra Gilbert argue takes away women’s sense of legitimacy as writers. Maxine Hong Kingston found a way to break out of the silence created by this anxiety, but the alienation which stems from such a rupture at the very center of their beings may be one of the most profound obstacles women face in finding their voices.
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4. See Margaret Homens, “Her Very Own Howl: The Ambiguities of Representation in Recent Women’s Fiction,” *Signs*, Winter, 1984, for an interesting discussion of the significance of women’s double-marginality.

5. Maxine Hong Kingston, *The Woman Warrior* (New York: Random House, 1977), p. 57. (All further page references will be cited within the text and will be to this edition.)