CHAPTER - III

THEMATIC ISSUES & CONCERNS

(The Woman Warrior)

The theme of ‘Silence’ and ‘Voice’ as its corollary pervades in The Woman Warrior. Kingston explores the various thematic, cultural and critical meanings of ‘Silence’ and ‘Voice’ and she examines thoroughly the parallels, contradictions that stem from the collusion of these two thematic aspects. ‘Silence’ is perceived as a virtue that displays woman’s femininity in almost all the traditional cultures of the world. Kingston addresses the influence of ancient Chinese culture on herself in cultivating ‘Silence’ as an essential character in the very nature of womankind. Kingston explores the manifestations, ramifications and consequences of silence in individual’s life at the backdrop of Chinese American culture. The Woman Warrior holds several kinds of silence in its thematic exposition. The reticence of the women characters provides the scope to understand the presence of several kinds of silence present in The Woman Warrior. One form of silence displayed by the unspeaking girl who bears the victimization. This shows the inability of the women to stand against the authority that imposes victimization in their lives. Kingston provides apt examples of the girls, who fail to raise their voice as they come from protective traditional families. The other form of silence is produced by lack of communication and fluency in their
language. Maxine has little English and not a better communication in mother tongue. The status of non communication even in mother tongue is due to the traditional subjugated social positions that are ingrained in their uncontested culture. Though Chinese is the language of domestic communication, she is required to speak in English. This condition of communicating in English, at the school further engraves her situation and stagnates the eerie silence. Kingston’s sister also faces the similar situation for the first three years of her school, which leads to serious silence in the American school. The silence of the characters finds representation in the actions and attitudes of life. It’s visual representation is manifested in the school paintings. The black colour stands for concealment which hides the sunlight. Concealing the thoughts and the imagination is portrayed as a characteristic presentation. Choosing the conceal thoughts, she imposes internal and external silence and masks the creative possibilities that crowd her mind. The other form of silence is related to the taboo status of certain subjects that jeopardize the life in America. The parents of South Asian community withhold the information about the cultural disturbances in America and allow their children to grow up with imaginations. The present generation of Asian Americans understand that there are certain kinds of cultural secrets which are not revealed in the presence of Chinese individuals. The children of Chinese community observe the participation of their parents
in rituals and fail to speak about the significance of those rituals. Many Chinese elders believe that discussing the significance of rituals could lead to deportation. Maxine in the novel is in complete knowledge of the cultural practices but fails to conform to those unexplained and unarticulated cultural customs.

Maxine is posited to pursue her education in the deep confusing cultural strictures. She is raised in the culture that keeps the girls reticent and shy. In America women are expected to speak in loud voices and these stand in contradiction to American tones. Their long years of stay in America fail to boost their social advantage. Maxine speaks in audible voice and learns to turn herself ‘American feminine’. Ironically her whispering and squeaking through a recitation invites the anger of American teachers. She draws inspiration from the early role models of Chinese women whose voices are strong and bossy. She learns that she must whisper, if she has to mold her life according the American standards. She still feels hard that her shaping of the character and future is inspired by her traditional Chinese culture. She experiences the contradictory reality. To her the Chinese women are vociferous, verbal, vibrant in expressing their opinion.

Kingston describes the silence of Chinese immigrants in the US 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 sociopolitical 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.

‘Silence’ of Early Chinese Immigrants: One of the characteristics of minority literature is that the authors do not only write about their individual selves, but often also about their ethnic groups and community. In this book, in the stories of herself, her mother Brave Orchid, and her aunt Moon Orchid, Kingston also presents Chinatown and the Chinese immigrants in the US as the background. From her descriptions, it is obvious that the Chinese-Americans are very often marked by silence. Silence does not only indicate the social, economic, and legal discrimination Chinese Americans have faced, but it also reflects the tearful history and the unjustified treatment of the Chinese Americans. In fact, before Kingston’s book, the history of Chinese Americans and their living conditions remained blank and neglected in the United States, even though Jade Snow Wong’s *Fifth Chinese Daughter* (1945) was very popular. Since the publication of the
‘The Woman Warrior’ and her second book China Men, there have been more and more attention and studies on these issues. In this sense, Kingston’s works also have an important value from a historical perspective.

In The Woman Warrior, Kingston narrates touching stories of early Chinese American immigrants. Indeed, the history of Chinese Americans in the US has been filled with hardship and tears. Although the Chinese started to immigrate to American from the mid-1840s, and contributed greatly to the construction of modern America, for example, to the construction of railways and plantations, they were not treated equally. In fact, the Chinese have been the only race who was excluded from American citizenship according to “The Chinese Exclusion Act”. The silence in the Chinatown and the silence of individual Chinese immigrants in Kingston’s book reflect the influence of this Act. As Cheung points out, “Chinese American silences… were reinforced by anti-Asian immigration laws” (163). Indeed, the Chinese immigrants’ lives were hard and depressing in America because of the effects of “The Chinese Exclusion Act”. On May 6, 1882, “The Chinese Exclusion Act” was passed in the United States. As the only major restriction on free immigration in U.S. history, this act excluded Chinese laborers from entering the country.
till 1893, and this Act also made Chinese immigrants permanent aliens by excluding them from U.S. citizenship (Gordon 237-58). In addition, the Act also affected seriously the Chinese who were already in the United States in that any Chinese who left the United States had to obtain certifications for re-entry. So the Chinese who were in America could not re-enter US if they went back to China to visit their families. Therefore, Chinese men in the U.S. had little chance of reuniting with their wives or of starting families in their new home. Gradually the Chinese community in the US became a “bachelor” society.

Meanwhile, once the Chinese immigrants obtained American citizenship after “The Chinese Exclusion Act” was abolished, their children could immigrate to the US legally according to the American law. However, as most of the Chinese in America left their wives in China, they could not have their own children in the US. Thus, there is the famous “paper son” phenomenon in Chinese American history: some people pretended to be the sons of the Chinese who were already in America in order to immigrate to America as well. These “paper son” and their families have to keep their secrets, because otherwise they would be sent back to China. In The Woman Warrior, Kingston writes about the silence in Chinese community in the US that every Chinese family has an unspoken secret, that “the Chinese
I know hide their names; sojourners take new names when their lives change and guard their real names with silence” (Kingston 18), and “The emigrants confused the gods by diverting their curses, misleading them with crooked streets and false names” (13). These refer to the “paper son” phenomenon that some Chinese immigrated to America with fake names and identities. The Chinese Americans have to keep silent in order to survive. “Don’t tell,” the narrator’s parents repeatedly admonish. They worry so much that they command their children, even though their children do not know the secrets. They have lived under heavy pressure because of fear. The parents are not only afraid of the white Americans, who are so different from the Chinese, but also afraid of being sent back to China, where there was famine and civil wars and they would have died either of hunger or of military draft.

However, life in the U.S. is not any better for them. Kingston describes how the Chinese are having tough and arduous lives: “those in the emigrant generations who could not reassert brute survival died young and far from home” (13). Dying in a foreign country without being able to return to the motherland is considered a real tragedy by Chinese people. As a Chinese idiom says, “falling leaves settle on the roots”, which represents the desire of a person residing elsewhere longing to return to his ancestral home eventually. In The
*Woman Warrior*, Kingston’s mother Brave Orchid only meets her sister Moon Orchid when she is sixty-eight years old, after thirty years since she left China, and her father is “the only brother to No-name Woman who never went back to China” (17). In fact, Kingston’s parents have not been able to visit China since they have immigrated to America, although they do want to, as they care about the news about China, wait anxiously for the letters from home in China, worry about their relatives living in China and celebrate together with them for happiness. That is also the reason why Kingston and other American-born Chinese children have very vague ideas about the real “China” since their cultural heritage is passed from their parents, without first-hand experiences. Thus, understanding the socio-historical background is very important if we want to understand Kingston’s book, as law and legal issues have silenced the generation of the narrator’s parents.

Indeed, as it is discussed above, the silence of the Chinese immigrants and the Chinese community partly results from the Chinese Exclusion Act. In fact, this silence reveals the discrimination the Chinese American face as a minority group in American society. In *The Woman Warrior*, Kingston mentions the unfair treatment the Chinese immigrants face, which further deepened the silence of Chinese
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Americans. In “White Tigers”, Kingston tells about her early work experience in America. When she is working in an art shop, her boss uses “nigger yellow” to refer to one paint color. Kingston is silent and weak in defending her race, “‘I don’t like that word,’ I had to say in my bad, small person’s voice that makes no impact” (50). Later, she works in a land developer’s association. When they choose to host a company banquet in a restaurant picketed by CORE and the NAACP, Kingston “refuses to type these invitations” (NAACP - National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, CORE - The Congress of Racial Equality) in a “whispered”, “unreliable” voice (50), and loses her job immediately. Therefore, silence, which stands for the powerless, reflects the oppression Chinese Americans shoulder under the racial discrimination in the United States.

In The Woman Warrior, Kingston also describes the Chinese immigrants’ work in the US. For instance, in the chapter “At the Western Palace”, the narrative of the workload and the working conditions of the laundry business of Brave Orchid and her family is told in a fairly vivid manner: they rise at 6 am to begin a day’s work; their children are taking shifts in the laundry besides going to school; they sleep on the ironing tables in the laundry during busy time, and so on. From these descriptions, it is not difficult to notice that the heavy workloads and
harsh working conditions are another reason for the Chinese immigrants being silent. As historian Ronald Takaki notes in *Strangers from a Different Shore*, “The Chinese were located in a different sector of the labor market from whites. By 1920s, 58 percent of the Chinese were in services, most of them in restaurant and laundry work, compared to only 5 percent for native whites and 10 percent for foreign whites” (240). The restaurant and laundry work is hard, which is the reason why there are fewer white people in these industries. Take the laundry work as an example: “the typical workload for the laundry worker was six and a half days a week, thirteen to fifteen hours a day”, and the daily routine of work “starts at 8:00 a.m., but did not close until 11.30p.m.”, as recorded in the document from socialist Paul Siu (Talbot, qtd. in Yuan, 8). A heavy work load makes people silent, particularly under poor working conditions - the hot air from the ironing machine, the danger of work injuries, and the insecurity of the future. However, in this business, women and men are equal in sharing the workload and hardness. Therefore, as Cheung points out, “silence runs even deeper in the work of minority women” (1988, 163). Brave Orchid is a good example. She proudly claims that “I have not stopped working since the day the ship landed. I was on my feet the babies were out” (122). And, it is true that her silence when she is at the work in the laundry business is an
obvious contrast of her loud voice when she is in China.

Besides political reasons and the immigrants’ work and working conditions, Kingston also focuses on presenting the image of her mother - Brave Orchid. Before moving to America, Brave Orchid was a successful doctor in China. However, because of her disability in mastering English, she has to become a manual worker in the US, as most of the other Chinese immigrants. In addition, the busy manual work occupies the Chinese immigrants’ lives so that they do not have time and interest in the community and politics. Facing the significant change in work and social status, Brave Orchid becomes silent. Thus, the language barrier is also another reason causing the silence of Chinese immigrants.

In addition, because of the lack of language skills, most of the first-generation Chinese immigrants cannot communicate with local people in English so they have to keep silent, limit their lives to such a small space, Chinatown. Living physically separated from the mainstream society, they appear silent towards outsiders – the mainstream society, and stay with other Chinese immigrants: they create Chinatowns, they communicate in Chinese languages, and they try to educate their children in Chinese schools. Like Moon Orchid notices when she lands in America, “so this is the United States. I’m
glad to see the Americans talk like us.” Replies Brave Orchid: “These are the overseas Chinese” (124). Therefore, for a very long time, although the Chinese immigrants have lived in America and made significant contribution to America’s economical development, and although they have physically loud voices, as Kingston comments, “the immigrants I know have loud voices, unmodulated to American tones even after years away from the village where they called their friendships out across the fields” (18), the Chinese and their community have been mute in front of the mainstream society. Therefore, the Chinese remain mysterious to the white Americans.

Besides the silence of the first-generation Chinese immigrants, in the last chapter “A Song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe”, Kingston concentrates on her own life as a second-generation Chinese American, an American-born Chinese, whose childhood is also marked with silence. Moreover, she also describes a “quiet Chinese girl”, another child of Chinese immigrants who keeps silence all her life. Based on these stories, it is important to notice that although the children of Chinese immigrants are different from their parents they still share the same feature – silence, which is mainly caused by Chinese Americans’ ethnic dilemma. As Kingston writes:

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, your mother who marked your growing with stories, from what is Chinese? What is Chinese tradition and what is the movies? (13)

For these American-born Chinese, although they grow up with their parents’ “talk-story” that explain Chinese traditions and culture, go to Chinese school in the evening, eat Chinese food and are able to speak Chinese language, they receive an American education and they are deeply influenced by American culture. China, their remote ancestry country, is only a cultural symbol in their minds, a place where the “talk-stories” happen. Just as the narrator confesses, “those of us in the first American generations have had to figure out how the invisible world the emigrants built around our childhoods fits in solid America” (13). When their parents are under the heavy pressure from work and political issues, they do not have patience to explain everything to their children, and sometimes, they behave rudely to their children, as Kingston remarks: “…adults get mad, evasive, and shut you up if you ask.” Without personal experience and close contact with China, they are confused about Chinese traditions, which are so different from American ones. Kingston notes:
You get no warning that you shouldn’t wear a white ribbon in your hair until they hit you and give you the sideways glare for the rest of the day. They hit you if you wave brooms around or drop chopsticks or drum them. They hit you if you wash your hair on certain days, or tap somebody with a ruler, or step over a brother whether it’s during your menses or not. You figure out what you got hit for and don’t do it again if you figured correctly…I don’t see how they kept up a continuous culture for five thousand years. Maybe they didn’t; maybe everyone makes it up as they go along. If we had to depend on being told, we’d have no religion, no babies, no menstruation (sex, of course, unspeakable), no death. (185)

Indeed, Chinese culture is mysterious to these American-born Chinese, as there are many taboos and complicated issues which are difficult to explain, and many aspects of cultural life are unspeakable, such as sex. In addition, their parents do not have the time and patience to explain everything clearly to their children, but simply use physical punishment to make their children remember. Therefore, these Chinese American children are more confused with Chinese culture and traditions, and begin to have a negative attitude towards
them which furthermore deepens their confusion of identity and this leading to silence. Because they are unfamiliar with Chinese culture and traditions, the Chinese Americans are in an ethnic dilemma: on the one hand, they other themselves from Chinese culture in order to acquire American recognition; on the other hand, they are still othered by the mainstream American society.

As I noted earlier, since Chinese Americans are born in the United States and educated in American schools, they are much influenced by American values and culture. Although their parents have tried to maintain their cultural heritage and educate them in Chinese evening school, it is still difficult for them to find recognition from Chinese culture. Towards Chinese culture and civilization, they are outsiders, although they have Chinese appearance physically. In addition, because they have no first-hand experience of China, and they are so much influenced by American ideology, the image of “China” that they present is not always true and authentic, and sometimes it is very strange. For example, in Kingston’s description, she writes that:

All the village were kinsmen, and the titles shouted in loud country voices never let kinship be forgotten… Any man within visiting distance would have been neutralized as
a lover - “brother...younger brother,” “older brother” – one hundred and fifteen relationship titles. Parents researched birth charts probably not so much to assure good fortune as to circumvent incest in a population that has but one hundred surnames. Everybody has eight million relatives. How useless then sexual mannerisms, how dangerous (18) ...

Obviously, Kingston understands little about the complicated addressing system in Chinese culture - that children address their parents’ friends as uncles and aunts, and adults address their close friends as brothers and sisters. She is annoyed by the Chinese way of greeting each other with loud and warm voices. That is partly the reason why in The Woman Warrior she sometimes writes about China in such a critical way and with a hostile attitude.

However, no matter how hard Chinese Americans want to be recognized as Americans and be part of the society, they are still “othered” by the mainstream society. Racial feature is one of the reasons. To the white Americans, the black hair, black eyes and yellow skin are the features of Chinese Americans. They may say “you speak good English” in order to be friendly, but towards American-born Chinese, this is an insult, as it shows that they are not accepted as Americans even if they were born in America and have grown up there.
Furthermore, Chinese people are seen to refuse to assimilate as the Chinese have strong cultural heritage and traditions. Kingston mentions some such details of her family - how they are different from white Americans. Her mother plants vegetable gardens rather than lawns, “she carries the odd-shaped tomatoes home from the fields and eats food left for the Gods” (13), “she will add nothing unless powered by Necessity, a riverbank that guides her life” (13); and “Chinese do not smile for photographs. Their faces command relatives in foreign lands – ‘Send money’ – and posterity for ever – ‘Put food in front of this picture.’ My mother does not understand Chinese-American snapshots. ‘What are you laughing at?’ she asks” (58). From her narrative, it is obvious that the Chinese Americans still keep their own lifestyle, which is very different from the mainstream American way, although they have been living in America for many years.

Thus, if physical hardship and external factors are one aspect causing the silence of Chinese Americans, the inner spiritual suffering, which is a result of the ethnic dilemma, aggravates their silence at the same time. As pioneers, although their bodies are in America, their spirits are vacillating between Chinese culture and American values. This phenomenon becomes especially serious among their children, the American-born Chinese, who have no firsthand
knowledge of China. They are American-born Chinese, who have Chinese appearance but American culture inside: they are commonly named as “banana”, as they are yellow outside and white inside. If the silence of their parents’ generation is mainly because of the struggle to survive, theirs is more related to the confusion of identity. This confusion of identity is also a reason causing their silence, particularly during their childhood. As Kingston describes in *The Woman Warrior*, this silence exists in many Chinese American kids, such as the “silent girl”, Kingston’s classmate, who has never said anything, even when she is grown up; and Kingston’s sister, who was also silent for three years. When she is grown up; Kingston herself also has this silent period. In her own childhood, she was silent for a quite long time and refused to say anything. As she narrates, “my silence was thickest–total–during the three years that I covered my school paintings with black paint…layers of black cover houses and flowers and suns…” (149). However, later she begins to speak again, and moreover, she finds writing as another way to speak, which symbolizes that she has solved her identity problem, established a new identity – as a Chinese American, and she begins to claim the rights of the Chinese American.

Kingston describes the Chinese immigrants’ life in America. Interpreting silence reveals Chinese immigrants hard work and harsh
working conditions in the US, reveals the social and economical problems they had, the ethnic dilemma they process, and the legal discrimination they have faced.

The two most important silent female figures in *The Woman Warrior*—are Kingston’s aunt the No-name Woman, and her other aunt Moon Orchid, who share similar silent features and tragic destinies, although their tragedies are caused by different reasons. The roots of their tragedies are misogyny and sexist attitudes in Chinese culture.

Kingston has placed specific emphasis on Chinese women’s lives in *The Woman Warrior*. As Cheung points it out in “‘Don’t Tell’: Imposed Silence in *The Colour Purple* and *The Woman Warrior*” (1988, 163), “Women authors and feminist critics have been unusually vocal on the theme of silence” where silence is used as an “artistic tool”, as “imposed invisibility”, and as the “reticence enjoyed upon women”.

Kingston describes the silence of many female characters, from her No-name aunt, who is forbidden to be mentioned by her family, to her aunt Moon Orchid, who is neglected by her husband and voiceless in suffering, to Kingston herself, who was silent during her adolescence. In addition, Kingston also describes the tragic lives of many other Chinese women in Chinese culture. It is obvious that silence is often associated with the victimization of women, particularly
In *The Woman Warrior*, Kingston begins the narrative with the tragedy of No-name Woman, the aunt on her father’s side, who is deliberately forgotten by the family as a humiliation. The No-name Woman’s tragic life begins in her marriage. She barely knows her husband before marrying him, because it is a “hurry-up wedding - just to make sure that every young man who went ‘out on the road’ would responsibly come home” (11). In fact, her family found the husband for her, and her wedding night is the first time she meets her husband. Although she is lucky that he is her age and she is the first wife, she does not have a happy family life. Her husband leaves for America so soon after the marriage that she has almost forgotten what he looks like. Then she has an affair, which is not because of lust, according to the narrator: “to be a woman…in starvation time was a waste enough. My aunt could not have been the lone romantic who gave up everything for sex”. (14)

Although Brave Orchid does not tell how the No-name Aunt becomes pregnant, Kingston invents several versions, one of which is that her aunt comes to the adultery on her own initiative because her happiness is out of reach after her husband is absent. But in a patriarchal society, a woman’s virtue is above her life, and adultery is
forbidden. So the price for it is to die and to be forgotten. Kingston assumes “some man had commanded her to lie with him and be his secret evil” (14). However, “the other man was not…much different from her husband. They both gave orders: she followed” (14). In Kingston’s imagination, the aunt is forced to keep silent again: “if you tell your family, I’ll beat you. I’ll kill you” (14). She has no choice but to suffer. When her adultery is discovered as she cannot hide her pregnancy, the villagers destroy the family home as a punishment for her. The No-name Woman could have revealed the man’s name as revenge, but she chooses to protect the father of her child by her silence: “she kept the man’s name to herself throughout her labour and dying; she did not accuse him that he be punished with her. To save her inseminator’s name she gave silent birth” (18). This behavior clearly victimizes her. After giving birth in a pigsty, she kills herself and the baby by drowning in the family well, although she “would protect this child as she had protected for its father” (21). Kingston writes that “carrying the baby to the well shows loving”, because the mother knows that the child would not have any future. “It was probably a girl; there is some hope of forgiveness for boys” (21). Here she clearly points towards the anti-female prejudice in traditional Chinese culture. However, the real punishment is not the raid and the hatred of the villagers, but her own family deliberately forgetting her. The No-name Woman’s tragedy is caused by
the negative influence of traditional Chinese culture and is also the result of a particular period in history as she could not travel with her husband to the USA.

For over fifty years, Kingston’s family tries to erase all memory of the No-name woman, “as if she had never been born” (3). Kingston’s mother repeated: “Don’t let your father know that I told you. He denies her”. Moreover, she uses it as a lesson for little Kingston: “Now that you have started to menstruate, what happened to her could happen to you. Don’t humiliate us. You wouldn’t like to be forgotten as if you had never been born. The Villagers are watchful” (13). This behavior, on the one hand, is to keep Kingston’s family reputation among the Chinese American community, as Kingston points out, “I have thought that my family, having settled among immigrants who had also been their neighbors in the ancestral land, needed to clean their name, and a wrong word would incite the kins people even here”. (22)

However, on the other hand, this “silencing” of living also implies a deeper meaning, the real and cruelest punishment for a human being. Kingston realizes it only later after many years: “they want me to participate in her punishment. And I have” (22). Indeed, the real punishment was not the raid swiftly inflicted by the villagers, but the family’s deliberately forgetting her, as family is highly valued in
Chinese culture. As Cheung comments, “to expunge her name, to delete the memory of her life, is perhaps the cruelest repudiation her kin could devise” (164). In old China, No-name Woman is a weak figure, who cannot defend herself and her innocent child. Therefore, the helpless and discarded woman has only one way to protest – to die. As Nietzsche *Twilight of the Idols and The Antichrist* (1990) asserts:

to die proudly when it is no longer possible to live proudly.

Death of one’s own free choice, death at the proper time, with a clear head and joyfulness, consummated in the midst of children and witnesses; so that an actual leave taking is possible while he who is leaving is still there. From love of life one ought to desire to die freely, consciously, not accidentally, not suddenly overtaken…

(56)

No-name Aunt’s death is an act of “dignity under pressure,” an act of keeping herself integrated. Although silence marks her tragic life as a victim, however, her silence is also the speechless revolt of a woman against the patriarchal society.

Another female victim related to silence is Kingston’s other aunt, her mother’s sister Moon Orchid. Moon Orchid moves to America from Hong Kong to look for her husband, who left China thirty years ago.
Although he is not a totally irresponsible husband, as “for thirty years she had been receiving money from him from America” (114), he has no intention to take her to America, not even after he has established a successful career as a doctor in the United States. On the other hand, Moon Orchid is silent: she has never revealed to him her wish to come to the United States, as she “waited for him to suggest it, but he never did” (114). When her sister – Brave Orchid – brings Moon Orchid to visit her husband to “claim” her right as the first wife, her husband refuses to admit her because he has remarried and already has a new family. He speaks English with his new wife, his patients are white Americans, and, as he says, “I’m living like an American” and he doubts Moon Orchid will “fit into an American household” (139). When they meet finally in America, after thirty years, he greets her only with cold interrogations “‘What are you doing here?’” and “‘Why are you here?’”, and questions her intention: “‘What do you want’”? Moon Orchid shrank from his stare; “it silenced her crying” (138-139). Confronted with his stare, Moon Orchid does not continue to accuse her husband and claim her rights as a wife. Facing this situation, Moon Orchid can only “open and shut her mouth without any words coming out” (138). It is her weakness that ruins her. She dare not say a word or claim the right as the first wife when facing such a husband as that who has “made her a widow” (139). Moon Orchid even smothers
her crying, just like a child threatened into silence after his/her wrong-doing. She becomes insane eventually. Obviously, the main reason for Moon Orchid’s tragedy is her personality: She has no strength to defend herself, no power to fight back, and no courage to claim the rights belonging to her. These result from the yoke of the feudal ethical code on Chinese women during a long period of history. As Kingston comments at the end, “I thought talking and not talking made the difference between sanity and insanity” (166). Indeed, silence here implies the oppression and suffering of Chinese women as victims over a long period in a male-dominated society.

From her two aunts’ tragic lives, Kingston is aware that a woman is doomed to be victim if she is dependent. Only by bringing her fate under her own control can she manage to claim her rights and live in dignity. The tragedies of No-name Woman and Moon Orchid consists of their blind obedience – they are unable to possess their own selves. Tracking the root, these tragedies are caused by sexism and misogyny in Chinese culture.

When pointing out the miserable life of the two women, Kingston castigates patriarchy mercilessly. No-name Woman’s adultery is exposed to the villagers’ raid and family’s renouncing, but her uncle, Moon Orchid’s husband, marries an American woman in
defiance of the existence of his Chinese wife. No-name Woman’s behaviour is viewed as a crime and her name is taken away from the family tree, while her uncle’s remarriage does not provoke any public accusation. His duty to the Chinese wife is no more than offering her some money: “you go live with your daughter. I’ll mail you the money I’ve always sent you” (138). In his sense, it seems that he has done his duty to his wife, and Moon Orchid’s madness has nothing to do with him. By representing the sharp contrasts, Kingston conveys her assailing of patriarchy. The old feudal China is dominated by Confucianism that advocates male superiority and female inferiority. Kingston’s father is such an ardent advocate that he conveys the idea in his speech again and again. He says, “Chinese smeared bad daughter-in-law with honey and tied them naked on top of ant nests. A husband may kill a wife who disobeys him. Confucius said that” (173). Guided by such a thought, a man is free to do what he wants – to marry as many concubines as he likes – while a woman has to follow “three obediences and four virtues”: She must obey her father before marriage, her husband after marrying, then her sons after her husband’s death. The four virtues set up a series of rules for her practice. First, she should know her position and behave according to the natural law of things. Second, she should guard her words, and not speak too much or bore others. Third, she should be dressed well and cleanly to
please men. Finally, she should not avoid her family duties. The No-name Woman breaks the second obedience and the first virtue. As a wife of a migrant, she is not only a practical widow, but also has the duty to serve her husband’s parents. And most importantly, she has to remain sexually faithful to her absent husband who is free to engage the service of prostitutes or take on new wives in America. Kingston does not describe No-name Aunt’s and Moon Orchid’s situations in China because their loneliness and hardship are beyond words. However, neither husband seems to realize the grievous situation of their wives.

Of course, all these are the corollary of the patriarchy in which women are always inferior and subordinate. Moreover, the misogyny in Chinese culture is also another important factor causing the females’ tragedy. In *The Woman Warrior*, Kingston also expresses how much she dislikes the misogynist culture. The Chinese saying “there’s no profit in raising girls. Better to raise geese than girls” is repeated again and again in the text, and the saying reveals the value of females in Chinese culture. In addition, Chinese family cherishes boys, and they do not hide the disappointment with girls. When Kingston and her sister go out, the Chinese neighbors will comment “One girl - and another girl”, and Kingston’s parents are “ashamed to take us out together” (48). Because of the discrimination against women,
Kingston works hard to be excellent, in order to make her parents feel proud of her. However, her efforts do not work. As Kingston writes, “I went away to college – Berkeley in the sixties – and I studied, and I marched to change the world but I did not turn into a boy”; “I was getting straight As for the good of my future husband’s family, not my own” (49). The Chinese believe that “When you raise girls, you’re raising children for strangers” that “Girls are maggots in the rice” and “it is more profitable to raise geese than daughters”. (48)

Thus, this male supremacy and misogynist ideology permeates Kingston’s girlhood. She always hears the noisy women sing a folk song that best sums up a woman’s status in family and society, and blind docility in marriage:

Marry a rooster, follow a rooster.

Marry a dog, follow a dog.

Married to a cudgel, married to pestle,

Be faithful to it. Follow it. (173)

This song tells the reality of the marriage in old China. In those days, women had no part in deciding their own marriage. In other words, marriage was the beginning of a new but uncertain life. Some women enjoyed a happy life because they were lucky enough to end up marrying
a kind husband. However, many others had to endure an unhappy arranged marriage, a tyrannical and cruel mother-in-law or simply the burdens of life itself. Most of them even suffered before they were married into another family. They could not free themselves from their positions as females in a patriarchal culture in China. They could not dedicate themselves to pursuing their life-long goals and make their dreams come true.

As Kingston writes: “Women in old China did not choose” (14). Living in a patriarchal and misogynist culture, women are in a position of being discriminated against and unfairly treated, just as Kingston said, if anything happens or even nothing happens but just gossip, the blame always falls on women. Although discrimination is no longer found in official documents, which always refer to men and women as equal, disregard for women is still in people’s minds even today.

Voice is another theme that Kingston explores in *The Woman Warrior* almost in parallel with the other themes. Voice is central to the characters who experience ‘Silence’ as a permanent ingrained trait of their lives. For No Name Woman and Moon Orchid, voice becomes the inevitable aspect of their characters. Making them to break the silence, the narrator gives voice to their lives. Brave Orchid communicates
imperfectly, with the non-Chinese world but is vocal among the fellow immigrants at home. In the larger milieu, her voice becomes inadequate and she lacks the ability to translate herself from one culture to another. Her inadequacy in comprehending American culture makes her a failure in understanding the subtleties of American culture. She makes the druggist feel that their children cannot afford sweets and she feels that she has won a cultural history by making the druggist to accept her demand for ‘reparation candy’. Maxine makes a way to find unique voice that accommodates her ancestral culture in equal share with that of American home and native country. She tries her best to lift the metaphorical black curtains that conceal her thoughts. She develops a powerful voice that speaks with enough authority. Maxine conveys firmly that finding a voice is an essential initial step towards articulating the self.

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, and, furthermore, these voices take different forms; 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 theme of Voice in *The Woman Warrior* is manifested in different forms, as the voice can be articulation, expressing one’s own opinions, which carry the Chinese classic and tradition. In addition, the voice can also be interpreted as writing and even rewriting classic literature in order to deliver a new voice. Kingston manages to break the silence, narrate her experience and reveal the truth into words. In *The Woman Warrior*, she publishes her No-name aunt’s story, which is against her father’s order. Furthermore, besides the silent female figures, such as No-name Woman and Moon Orchid, Kingston also describes women who do have voices in *The Woman Warrior*. In addition, the voices take different forms: they do not only appear as the physical sounds and articulation, but also refer to abstract forms, such as oral literature and writing, which represent deeper meanings.

On the one hand, these voices are females’ voices. Thus, breaking silence, especially breaking females’ silences, is connected with acknowledging female influence and female power. On the other hand, as a second-generation Chinese American, Kingston “is afraid of losing her identity, of being erased or unhinged - as her two aunts have been respectively erased and unhinged - through silence” (Cheung 164).

The most obvious and significant form of voice is speaking.
Kingston herself realizes the importance of articulation from her own experience. At school she is considered retarded by her American teachers, because she is unable to express herself in English in class, in speech or on paper. She writes, “when I went to kindergarten and had to speak English for the first time, I became silent (148).... My silence was thickest – total – during the three years that I covered my school painting with black paint” (149). Therefore she was considered retarded and “flunked kindergarten and in the first grade had no IQ – a zero IQ”. (164)

In fact, the narrator was not the only silent child. As Kingston writes, My sister also said nothing for three years, silent in the playground and silent at lunch. There were other quiet Chinese girls not of our family, but most of them got over with it sooner than we did. (149)

One reason that leads to this is the silence deeply rooted in her parents’ generation. In addition, being silent or not expressing one’s opinion is also regarded as a merit in traditional Chinese culture, as “talking too much is prone to error”. And the narrator’s parents try to educate their children according to the traditional Chinese value. However, it is noted that Kingston has a negative attitude towards some parts of Chinese culture, for instance, the description of the cutting of girls’
tongues. On this question Kingston admitted in an interview that, partly unconsciously, when she wrote these chapters, she intended to discuss Chinese Americans’ attitude towards the acceptance and rejection of traditional culture. Apparently, Kingston appears to provide an answer to this question at the end: the quintessence should be kept, but the dross should be abandoned, especially the aspects related to women’s rights, their right to speak, and their right to speak up. Therefore she is trying very hard to help the silent Chinese girl in school to talk. She cries: “If you don’t talk, you can’t have a personality…Talk, please talk”. (162)

In addition, the silence of the children of the Chinese immigrants also reflects the racial discrimination they shoulder in America. As Kingston notes, “the other Chinese girls did not talk either, so I knew the silence had to do with being a Chinese girl” (150). The narrator recounts how in her second grade their class did a play and “the whole class went to the auditorium except the Chinese girls” (150). Apparently the Chinese students were neglected by the teacher for the play, because their “voices were too soft and nonexistent” (150). The Chinese children do not seem to have many playmates, except Chinese children and black students, as Kingston writes, “I liked the Negro students best because they laughed the loudest and talked to me as if I
were a daring talker too” (149). Although they are silent in American school, “some found voices in Chinese school…” (152), where they are able to talk, read, and argue.

Realizing the importance of breaking silence and being able to deliver voice, the narrator’s mother sliced the fraenum of the narrator’s tongue in order to make her to talk: “‘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.’” (148)

However, the difficulties of delivering voice are not related to physical reasons, but to the inner reason: the confusion of their identity. This confusion causes Chinese Americans’ silence. Just as Kingston says: “reading out loud was easier than speaking because we did not have to make up what to say…” (150).

They realize they have the urge to be clear of their identity, as being Chinese Americans is different, which is neither Chinese nor American. As Brave Orchid answers her daughter’s question that “isn’t ready tongue an evil”, she replies “‘Things are different in this ghost country.’” (148). Indeed, being a Chinese American is different, the difference exists in many aspects, especially in the aspects related to women’s rights, their right to speak, and their right to speak up.
Therefore she is trying very hard to help the silent Chinese girl in school to talk. She cries: “If you don’t talk, you can’t have a personality…Talk, please talk”. (162)

As Kingston is aware of the importance of women’s voice and articulation, besides the silent aunt and No-name Woman, she describes many women characters who are able to, and dare to, express their thoughts by articulation. As said, among them, Brave Orchid represents the strongest voice.

Brave Orchid 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. At first, her name – Brave Orchid, which is not a common Chinese female’s name – reveals her strong will and personality. After she moves to America, she still keeps her original name, as the narrator notes:

Nor did she change her name: Brave Orchid. Professional women have the right to use their maiden names if they like. Even when she emigrated, my mother kept Brave Orchid, adding no American name nor holding one in reserve for American emergencies. (74)

In addition, in many ways, she does not act like a traditional Chinese woman: She disobeys her husband’s order and tells the prohibited
stories to her daughter; she processes her own career and works hard; she has no fear of men and Western “ghost” 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’” (132). Her own life story represents a strong voice as well, a voice that reveals a brave and respected, powerful, Chinese woman.

Indeed, her own life has been heroic. Her husband emigrated to the United States fifteen years before her, leaving her alone in China. During that time, the couple’s two young children died. Unlike the ordinary Chinese women at the time who are mostly housewives with little education, Brave Orchid invests the money received from her husband working in America into education. At the age of 37, lying about her age as 27, she gained admission to a Chinese medical college. After two years of intensive study and hospital practice, she earns a diploma in “midwifery, Pediatrics, Gynecology, Medicine, Surgery, Therapeutics, Ophthalmology, Bacteriology, Dermatology, Nursing, and Bandage” (57). She becomes a respected doctor in her village, a heroine in a culture that insisted women could only be wives or slaves. Just as Kingston writes about her proudly, “My mother
wore a silk robe and western shoes with big heels, and she rode home carried in a sedan chair. She had gone away ordinary and come back miraculous, like the ancient magician who came down from mountains” (73).

However, when she moves to America, Brave Orchid’s life takes a sharp down-turn. As she herself recalls old memories in China, “some villages brought out their lion and danced ahead of me. You have no idea how much I have fallen coming to America” (74). This sharp transition is because of her lack of professional training in America and language skills, so that she cannot practice medicine. Instead, she works at her husband’s side in a laundry, and sometimes labouring as a field hand harvesting tomatoes. Labour work changes her physical appearance: she was:

small in China… but in America she can carry a hundred pounds of Texas rice up - and downstairs. She could work at the laundry from six thirty a.m. until midnight, shifting a baby from an ironing table to a shelf between packages, to the display window… (97)

In order to compete with other young laborers, she “dyed her hair so that the farmers would hire her” (97). By the money she earned from hard work, she also supports her relatives in China.
Moreover, at the age of 45 she gives birth to Maxine Hong Kingston, the first of six American-born children. Amazingly, she settles down very quickly into the laundry business and adopts the role of housewife and mother. Brave Orchid once said, “A man’s real partner is the hardest worker” (135)… I have not stopped working since the day the ship landed. I was on my feet the moment the babies were out. In China ever even had to hang up my own clothes” (97) … and later I can’t stop working. When I stop working, I hurt.” (99) At a senior age, when she would have started to enjoy life, she still has to work hard because of the unequal treatment as an immigrant in America. She said:

Those Urban Renewal Ghosts gave us moving money… It took us seventeen years to get our customers. How could we start all over on moving money, as if we two old people had another seventeen years in us?… This is a terrible ghost country, were a human being works her life away… (97)

Indeed, fighting with the fate and working hard all time in her life, she uses her own example to prove it, and inspire her children.

As a mother, Brave Orchid does not act like a traditional mother figure, whose role is not only to pass the traditional culture to her children but also to defend the traditions and doctrines. Although she obeys her husband’s order, she is not the traditional Chinese woman and
mother. She goes out alone for education, which is a challenge to the traditional idea that claims a woman’s ignorance is a virtue: In school, she moves alone to the ghosts’ room and drives them away; In America, she breaks her husband’s order on the silencing of the No-name Woman and she encourages her sister to claims her rights as a wife and fight with her husband; She tells her daughters that a woman grows up to be a wife and slave, but she tells them also the legend of *The Woman Warrior* Fa Mulan. If the story of Fa Mulan is legendary and fantastic, Brave Orchid’s life is real and true - she is the incarnation of Fa Mulan. Armed with unyielding spirit, Brave Orchid proves herself a brave and independent woman, a woman warrior in reality, and a role model for her children.

The other form of voice in *The Woman Warrior* – the talk-story. Kingston creates two narrators, the mother and the daughter. Both of them talk stories: Kingston’s mother Brave Orchid tells stories to her children when they are little, which are stories of their family, their ancestral country China, and Chinese legends and oral literature: Kingston also tells stories when she grows up. These stories are different: They are based on the stories from her mother but the mother’s stories are embedded within her own stories, thoughts, and they are printed on paper.

Although the stories in *The Woman Warrior* are in the first person
except the third Chapter “At the Western Palace”, which is in the third person - there are two main narrators of all the stories: the mother Brave Orchid and “I”, Kingston herself. Brave Orchid uses talk stories to her children before sleep, and then “I” tells these stories to others by publication. In fact, “I” is divided into two parts: one is the “I” in childhood, who listens to her mother talking story and imagines her own story at the same time; and the other “I”, who is a grown-up and able to tell her own stories. Because of the complexity of the narrators, the stories in *The Woman Warrior* are also sophisticated. As defined by Kingston, talk-story is:

an oral tradition of history, mythology, genealogy, bedtime stories and how the stories that have been passed down through generations, an essential part of family and community life… It is actually part of the ‘low’ or ‘small’ Chinese culture. (Huntley 66)

Kingston’s mother Brave Orchid is a natural story teller, a “champion talker” (180). Her stories are various and colourful, from the tragic No-name aunt to the mysterious legend of the heroine Fa Mulan. In addition, the memoir begins and ends with important talk-stories from Brave Orchid: The first one is about No-Name Woman and the last is about Ts’ai Yen, a famous ancient Chinese poetess. Therefore,
Brave Orchid’s talk-story is another important form of voice, which has a significant implication in that it does not only carry on the cultural heritage to the new generations of Chinese Americans, but also assists the mother in educating her children.

As we know, the oral and the written literature are two different forms for passing cultural heritage to the next generation. In *The Woman Warrior*, Kingston uses her mother’s talk-story, especially the stories a mother tells to her children, to pass ancient Chinese myths, legends, and literature to the next generation. These stories include the famous Chinese legend of Fa Mu Lan, stories of Yue Fei, another national hero, and poetess Ts’ai Yen. In addition, there are also stories revealing various aspects of Chinese culture, such as ghost stories, and stories about Western Palace and Eastern Palace in Chapter Four, which indicate the polygamy in old China. These stories are very attractive to Western readers. Thus, the talk-story functions as an instrument explaining the Chinese tradition and customs, memorizing the motherland and relatives in China, and disseminating cultural heritage to the American-born Chinese children.

In addition, talk-stories also act as an educational tool in the book. Kingston writes, “Whenever she had to warn us about life, my mother told stories that ran like this one…” (13). Indeed, Brave Orchid
tells talk-stories also intending to teach her children important life lessons, and to make them behave in a certain way, particularly in a Chinese girl’s way. “Now that you have started to menstruate, what happened to No-name Woman could happen to you. Don’t humiliate us. You wouldn’t like to be forgotten as if you had never born. The villagers are watchful” (13). The stories are powerful lessons in proper Chinese values and behaviour, but they are confusing to Maxine because they are appropriate to her parents’ lives in China, a world she has never known first-hand.

As such, the mother’s talk stories are both stifling and liberating to Kingston, responsible for many of her fears and insecurities but also providing her with inspiration. Therefore, as a second narrator, and also the key narrator of the book, Kingston starts to “talk stories” as well. She does not merely repeat her mother’s stories; however, she reconstructs these “talk-stories” and re-tells them in her own way. In the No-name Woman’s story, Brave Orchid recalls the memory of her sister-in-law ‘No-name Woman’. She focuses on the punishment of the poor woman from villagers and her own family, in order to teach her children, especially her daughters, to behave properly and follow the virtues. As for Kingston, when “I” tells the story of No-name Woman, she cares more about her aunt’s inner spiritual world. She imagines in what situations her aunt starts adultery and whether she had affection to him: she describes
her aunt’s clothing, from colour to style; and she also sets up the
scene when No-name Woman gives birth and commits suicide with
the baby which is purely imaginary: She tries to portray her aunt’s
feminine aspects from a modern female’s point of view. Besides,
Kingston also re-tells the traditional Chinese classic folklores, such as Fa
Mulan’s story.

Writing is interpreted as a third form of voice, an alternative to
speech. As Cheung points out, “The more women are ordered to keep
quiet, the more irrepressible their urge to cry out, if only on paper”
(1988, 164). Indeed, Kingston uses literature as an effective voice to
break the prohibition of “not tell” and express her own thoughts.
She once said in an interview with Shelley Fisher Fishkin: “My
mother says, ‘don’t tell what I am about to tell you,’” and I think, ‘well,
I’m not going to ‘tell,’ I’m just going to write.’ And she tells it in
Chinese. But what if I told it in English?” (Fishkin 785) Moreover,
Kingston believes that, for a Chinese American, writing is a kind of
right, a power, and a new way to be a warrior in society. This power
is based on the understanding of her ancestral nation and its history, and
the acceptance of the traditions and arts - myths, stories and songs (Cui
2001). Frank Chin also talks about writing as a power in his book,
which is part of the social role of a writer (Chin). This point of view is
symbolically expressed at the end of *The Woman Warrior*.

In the last chapter of the book, “A Song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe”, Kingston employs a first-person narrative to concentrate on the stories of her own life in different phases: from a quiet, alienated little girl who has difficulties in communicating with others to a rebellious teenager who accuses her mother of attempting to make her a wife and a slave, then finally to an adult who is embracing her past and finally applying writing as a way of finding a voice. At the end, Kingston uses the story of Ts’ai Yen - an ancient Chinese poetess – as a symbolic metaphor to her own process of finding her own voice and identity. Just like Ts’ai Yen keeps teaching Chinese and singing Chinese songs to her children after being kidnapped by the “barbarians” (There is a tradition in China that foreigners are called “barbarians”, probably because Chinese culture is one of the earliest civilization) Kingston’s mother tells talk-stories to her children; just like Ts’ai Yen uses poetry as a weapon to fight with barbarians. Kingston uses words and stories to rebel against the old patriarchal society and discrimination of women. And just like Ts’ai Yen translates the barbarians’ songs to her own people – Han Chinese – when she returns to her home country, Kingston finally combines American values and traditional Chinese cultural heritages, with the assistance
of American language – English, to create a new version of second-generation Chinese American lives, which destroy the Orientalist stereotypes. As Cheung comments, Kingston reshapes her ancestral past to fit her American present, that she “is asserting an identity that is neither Chinese nor white American, but distinctively Chinese American” (1988, 169). Besides, Kingston also expresses a new voice through the rewriting of classic Chinese literature. The second chapter, “White Tiger”, is the most poetic in the book, and there she creates the impressive heroine Fa Mulan.

In The Woman Warrior, Kingston’s Fa Mulan follows a bird away into the mountains, where she starts to practice martial arts with an old couple. The life on the mountain is isolated, and filled with hardship. After fifteen years of training, she returns home and decides to replace her father to be drafted in army. Her parents take her to the family hall and carve “revenge” on her back so that “wherever you go, whatever happens to you, people will know our sacrifice. And you’ll never forget either” (38). During her army years, Fa Mulan marries and even gives birth to a baby. At day time, she makes a sling for the baby inside her big armor and rides to the battlefield; at night, inside her tent, she lets the baby ride on her back. Eventually, the army she leads defeats the enemy. They arrive at the capital
Peiping, decapitate the emperor and make the peasant who leads the army the new emperor. After she goes home, Fa Mulan attacks the baron’s fortress and takes his life in payment for his crimes against the villagers. Many villagers come to verify the baron’s crimes. She then goes to her parents-in-law and her husband and son. Her son goes to welcome her. She and her husband hold a wedding that could not be held during wartime. Fa Mulan says, “Now my public duties are finished. I will stay with you, doing farm work and housework, and giving you more sons”. (50-51)

Kingston has grown up with her mother’s talk-stories, strongly influenced by Chinese traditional culture she also develops her own values and independent thoughts, which are more influenced by American ideology and values. Thus, this combination is expressed by creating the new Mulan: Being a Chinese American, she will not only be a wife and slave when she grows up, but a heroine, a sword woman, a woman warrior! This also solves the confusion of the identity of the Chinese American, who is not a Chinese and neither only an American, but a Chinese American. Just like Kingston explains in Amirthanayagam:

Now we do call ourselves Chinese, and we call ourselves Chinamen, but when we say, ‘I am Chinese,’ it is in the
context of differentiating ourselves from Japanese. For example, when we say we are Chinese, it is short for Chinese-American or ethnic Chinese; the ‘American’ is implicit. (Amirthanayagam, 59-60)

From her statement, a strong consciousness of Chinese American identity is established. This also enables her to interpolate and “mis-write” Chinese classics.

Kingston uses different forms of voice, which include articulation, talk-story and oral literature, and writing and rewriting of classical Chinese literature, in *The Woman Warrior*. The multiple voices used in the book give the readers a glimpse of the story from several different angles. In addition, Maxine Hong Kingston uses a very effective narrative technique in her writing. She combines legend with truth and past with present. By doing this she combines the American way of life together with the Chinese way of life, and finally finds a way that these two can coexist.

‘Constructing Identity’ is another thematic concern that Kingston explores. It is explored as the formation that leads to the Stable and viable self image. Two kinds of identity are the central focus of *The Woman Warrior*: the immigrant identity, represented by Brave Orchid and the Asian American identity carried out by the narrator. These identities are
perceived in separate consideration, even though they share common elements. Negotiating with the issues of gender, cultural conflict and assimilation, Brave Orchid and her daughter are understood be dealing with the issues of alienation from the dominant culture, performing a balancing act. Brave Orchid shares the experience of many immigrants and comes to terms with the grand common disillusionment. Brave Orchid raised and educated in China, manages to adjust to life in United States. She faces the consequences of acculturation but she never allows herself to be the victim of assimilation. Though she continues to perform the significant cultural and religious rituals of Chinese and Buddhist religions, she distances her children from the traditional religious and cultural upbringing. She relinquishes her mental and emotional connection with the traditional culture and buries it in the deeper psyche and even dismisses the little chance of returning to the country of her birth. She suffers from carving a definable identity considering American culture as an alien culture and struggles to replace the ingrained Chinese culture with the appropriate culture.

The life lived by Brave Orchid is undoubtedly a Chinese. Her inability to assimilate into American culture is constantly obvious. She used to cook the meals with Chinese edibles and used to make much use of raccoons, hawks, owls, garden snails, turtles, skunks and pickled bear
claw. She used to burn candles for good luck in the laundry, and old store clothes. She used to do complete shopping to sustain her. She is all the time reminded of the cultural curse. She resists the druggist without ordering the Candy’s with children. She is successful in coercing the children into banging the pot lids to prevent the celestial Frogs, from swallowing the moon during an eclipse.

Brave Orchid is absolutely Chinese to her children. To Moon Orchid she is an American with her alarming energy. As per the Chinese custom, Brave Orchid takes the bold step of hanging up her and her husband’s portrait on the walls of her house. This aggressiveness is manifested in her attempt to reunite her sister Moon Orchid with her husband. When her attempt to reunite her sister with her husband fails, she demands that the recalcitrant husband bears the financial expenditure to some extent. Due to the separation from the husband, when Moon Orchid lapses into insanity, Brave Orchid totally becomes Chinese. She treats her sister with traditional plants discarding the prescription by a physician. On realizing the failure of traditional Chinese methods, she admits Moon Orchid into mental asylum reasserting American efficiency. After experiencing cultural dilemma and transition, she admits with a bewilderment that she is now “a sad bear; a great sheep in a wool shawl” (100). She no longer considers herself as a woman warrior that raised six
American children. She gives up her dreams of China as a domestic bliss. She considers that she is a border dweller emotionally vested with American self. She stops saving the money for visiting China and she purchases the outward emblems of American life.

It is pertinent to observe that identity is always shaped, disfigured and distorted by biculturalism which in turn creates double existence. It produces descendants of immigrants. It creates the feelings of two distinct cultural traditions and provides discomfort with either one. For generations of American immigrant populations, biculturalism is a reality. The cultural conflict and the issues of race and ethnicity become unavoidable factors of immigrant life. Uma Parameswaran, Asian American critic puts this as a ‘hyphenated identity’. Many of the Americans growing up in hyphenated cultures will have to negotiate with multiple cultures, sign systems, languages and eventually a sense of self that encompasses all the aspects related to immigrant experience. To the question ‘What is Chinese and what is the movies?’, Maxine describes the dilemma of her life. Her knowledge of China is fragmentary and fictitious. She constantly derives information from her oral narration. Though her parents accept a form of Chinese behavior, she fails to articulate those things with a disregard for the unknown customs.

Brave Orchid, like her daughter, is not the product of American
biculturalism. She is the embodiment of Chinese culture. She disregards American identity and exhibits courage in discarding. She is of the view that American culture complicates the life with innumerable incomprehensibilities which are impossible to decipher. She dismisses America as a Ghost country. But Maxine’s childhood and adult life is marked by tremendous dislocation and fluctuation. She is caught in between the two solitudes of Chinese and American identities. She is not considered as Chinese by the older immigrant community and is refused as an American by the younger generations by her Chinese appearance. She is alienated from the ancestral Chinese culture and the existing American culture. Her very existence is triply contested. She is perceived as a female in Chinese Community retaining the vestiges of Confucian patriarchy. She is received as Chinese American woman struggling to adjust with White patriarchy. She is also a Chinese American in a European American environment.

Maxine oscillates in between Chinese and American culture. It is because of her ethnicity, she fits imperfectly into the country of her birth. She is torn between two national narratives and two sets of cultural myths. Her urgent task is to integrate the identities in the process of constructing an authentic self. Her life paves the way for the emergence of new self that incorporates the elements of Chinese and American
identities. The struggle to create a new self becomes the theme and permeates in the novels of Maxine Kingston’s work. Obviously, Maxine in The Woman Warrior learns the ways to mediate between ancestral Chinese culture and contemporary American culture.

The Narrative Structure of The Woman Warrior invites the critical attention. The narrative focuses on the personal account of Kingston. Though it is a kind of autobiographical narration, it is interpolated in the episodic and loosely related assemblage of family stories, traditional Chinese tales. The reminiscences of Kingston combine to make this as the most exciting narrative pattern. It is comprised of lose chronological episodes developed logically. Its text is filled with allusions, reminiscences, motifs and is displaced by other texts. The major narratives represent the decades in Kingston’s family history set is thematic order. This describes the narrator’s coming of age narrated through flashbacks, retrieved memories and recollections.

All the distinct sections with own titles, comprises a narration that is integral to the entire work. The story of each section is recounted by Brave Orchid, with the narrator’s revision and recreation of the story. Multiple levels of narrations, separated by spatial and temporal aspects, becomes the superimposition of traditional story or myth. The narration creates the intricate web of incidents and relationships. Many critics and
readers are of the view that *The Woman Warrior* is organized along a
circular scheme. Kingston takes the centrality of the second and fifth
sections in the novel. The introduction and conclusion of the Novel
portray Brave Orchid commencing a story. The discussion identifies the
author of the novel as Kingston and the narrator as Maxine. Avoiding the
confusion, Kingston is presented as the narrator of the novel.

Kingston employs talk story as a narrative strategy. She
simultaneously presents a variety of intricate stories. Her own narration
of life is combined with Brave Orchid’s history, history of the legendary
tales of Chinese woman, the sad story of Chinese woman in US and the
sad story of Moon Orchid’s abandonment. In addition to these, Kingston
includes folktales, legends and historical episodes that parallel function in
contrast with the lives of her protagonists. It is through this narration, she
locates and posits herself in the chronological evolution of the mythical
and historical, strong and weak women. The lives of the warrior women
are used as springboards to further establish social justification to the
lives of Fa Mu Lan, Brave Orchid and Ts’ai Yen. Negating with the
western autobiographical chronological rendering of episodes in life,
Kingston claims the historical and contextual transformation of new
American narrative patterns which unite the present and past.

Kingston do not subscribe to the conventions of autobiography.
With the substantial chunks of fiction, Kingston creatively constructs the versions of her life events. She indulges in conjectures, revisions and attempts variations on her aunt’s story to contextualize with the stories of No Name Aunt. Kingston speculates on the life of her aunt and posits questions about the events that lead to her aunt’s suicide. Kingston’s propensity to speculate, to present alternate possibilities of events remains a hallmark of *The Woman Warrior*. The speculation and creative construction exhibited by Kingston brings in the apt recognition for tremendous fluidity of memoir and storytelling. *The Woman Warrior* is based on fact and fiction and moves from one genre to another and questions the instability of memory. It leaves the reliability on Brave Orchid’s memory for debate. In general perception, memory is understood as the recollection of factual events. It is also perceived as the fictional reconstruction of fragments of experience. Kingston, allows the reader to speculate and leaves the options open. Subscribing to the Derridian notion that there is nothing outside the text, she refuses to close the meanings of the text and invites the reading communities to exercise the freedom in interpretation.

Kingston employs the juxtaposition of multiple versions of single story narrated by a different narrator. It is through this narrative strategy and technique, she constructs her text successfully. Moon Orchid arrives
in US, to reject her westernized husband and in the process succumbs to madness. Kingston, despite her absence, presents the confrontation in a detailed manner. She undermines the initial version of the story and makes an excuse that her brother has not told her story. Through these intermittent changes and by allowing the character’s midway intervention, Kingston acknowledges the pliability of stories. She is of the view that truth is determined obscured by entanglements interpretation or talk story.

Kingston involves variety of narrative forms from literary and oral tradition, as part of her narrative strategies. She has incorporated the legend and myth of Fa Mu Lan, memoir of silent Chinese girl, historical reconstruction of Ts’ai Yen, family talk story of No Name Woman and Speculation of Moon Orchid’s experience. Each of these narratives exemplify a different way of privileged information. Memory is examined through a variety of narrative structures. She encourages the readers to imagine innovative ways of embracing the past, through a synthesis of disparate and various elements.

Another important strategy in *The Woman Warrior* is transgression of borders and boundaries. The novel straddles between fact and fantasy, dream and walking reality, between autobiography and fiction. This precarious position is obvious in Fa Mu Lan crossing gender boundaries
during her masquerade as a soldier. Dressing as a man to join the army, she ceases to be ‘worthless female’. Through her military prowess, she proves that woman have the ability to excel and proves that woman can have both domestic and public lives. Though, this gender crossing is not the only manifestation of unstable borders, the cultural difference between American and Chinese proves problematic for Chinese Americans. This confusion reinforces the narrative inclination to fluctuate between cultures and sometimes to go beyond the inscribed cultures.

*The Woman Warrior* manifests the unstable borders and proves gender crossing between Chinese and American cultures. Kingston poses a pertinent question to all the 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 the movies? (5-6) The Chinese Americans are defined by the tensions that exist between the dominant tradition and the ancient tradition. This cultural dilemma reinforces the narrative inclination to fluctuate between cultural texts. Additionally, Kingston presents the border crossings as another important thematic concern. She attributes a new meaning to the word ‘Ghost’. Brave Orchid’s recollections of Ghosts stem from her experience in US. Ghosts are not nocturnal. They are insubstantial creatures manifest in
daylight, possessing the traits of humans and spirits. To Kingston they are the evidence of permeability of the border between the real and the supernatural. In Chinese culture Ghosts include individuals with familiar occupations—Bus Ghosts, Mail Ghosts, Social Worker Ghosts, Public Health Nurse Ghosts. The word Ghost which has a new set of meanings is redefined in America as unfathomable beings representing the immigrant community. Obviously, the Chinese American Ghosts move between bicultural worlds copying human language. They inhabit the world of Maxine and siblings. As ghosts of the Gold Mountain, Maxine and her brothers exist between two conflicting ways of life. Brave Orchid withholds important cultural secrets from her children who have been: “born among ghosts: taught by ghosts… are themselves half ghosts” (183). Defying the rules of Chinese proper behavior, Brave Orchid shouts that her daughter is: “Ho Chi Kuei”- ‘a kind of Ghost’.

Another narrative strategy executed by Kingston is juxtaposition of binary oppositions: East and West, China and America, Silence and Speech. These oppositions provide a context for the narrator’s stories with the saga of family’s emigration to America. It is due to these juxtapositions. Maxine reconciles her own dual identity. This makes her to grow as a woman as she understands to construct her own identity from the fragments of heritage.
At its basic level, the woman warrior is a woman’s memoir. It is the constructive narrative of the discovery of an individual. It foregrounds the stories of woman, whose lives undertake to journey from childhood to womanhood. The positive role models of women speak and act throughout the narration and shape their lives gaining control over their circumstances. It is voice of Brave Orchid that opens and dominates the narration. No Name Aunt, Moon Orchid represent Maxine tries to become. Employing three strategies, Kingston develops six women as characters. She describes the physical appearances of the characters, analysis the language and its significance and discusses the implications of the actions of the characters performed by the woman. Brave Orchid is described as an intelligent, pretty and highly conscious character. She appears as if she is the visionary of the great grand children. She has a dry and hard gaze. The photographs that she had while graduating Hackett Medical College exposes the steel and the calm steady resilience. On the other hand Moon Orchid lacks her sister’s sturdiness. She is an antithesis of hardworking Brave Orchid. As a young girl Moon Orchid is an epitome of young Chinese Femininity.

Language decides the character of women in the novel. It opens with linguistic admonition: “You must not tell anyone”. This perspective, introduces us to understand Brave Orchid’s penchant for talking and the
habit of making advisory pronouncements to her daughters. For Brave Orchid, Moon Orchid, and Fa Mu Lan language is the representation of self. The narration proves the motivation of all these women to become warriors. As a corollary to this process of self proclamation, the poet Ts’ai Yen communicates through her words the distilled experiences that are transmitted into emotions subjected to artistic creation. As a complete contrast to the construction of self through language, absence of language too defines the characters. No Name Aunt subscribes to complete silence throughout the novel. She remains in absolute silence, when the villagers ransack her home. She chooses silence when she is asked to identify her father. She gives birth in silence and dies in silence. The eerie Silence exhibited by No Name Aunt stands for the silence of inaction. This absolutely stands for Chinese American wordless silence.

Kingston chooses to describe significant actions that stand for revealing the nature of individuals. The spectacular adventures of Brave Orchid in encountering the sitting ghost stands for her characterization. These encounters reveal Brave Orchid’s best qualities: leadership, courage, the ability to improvise, the fortitude that allows her to bear six children after her forty fifth birthday.

Different from Brave Orchid, Moon Orchid is tentative, childlike, dependent and easily distracted. During her visit to the house, she
intervenes and interrupts all the works and offers help. Kingston portrays Moon Orchid’s cultural displacement establishing a comparison between her and Brave Orchid. Moon Orchid marvels around the differences with which she is unfamiliar and prods Brave Orchid’s children to determine their reality. Arriving from a different culture in which children and adults interact constantly, Moon Orchid remains helplessly foreign.

Kingston remains central to *The Woman Warrior*, though she recounts the stories of the real and legendary warrior women. Kingston reveals her character through her voice, thoughts and actions. She is sure of her creativity, sometimes led by curiosity. She voices her thoughts and preserves her strong opinions. But she finds it difficult to assert herself. She is confused about her place in the world, her identity and herself. In some instances, she raises her voice against racial prejudices; but fails to receive support for her assertion from her own community. Maxine faces ridicule from a powerful matriarch who announces that the girl has a ‘pressed duck voice’ (192).

It is during the course of *The Woman Warrior*; Maxine reveals herself through her thoughts, speculations and tries to reconstruct the events. Placing herself in the place of forgotten aunt, Maxine speculates that her aunt’s suicide might be an act of revenge for the treatment inflicted on her own anger, stubbornness and the desire to have her role in
the construction of herself. It is pertinent to observe that Maxine’s childhood is also marked by similar rage and profound insecurity. She nurses her disappointment and anger quietly, when her uncle takes her brother on a jaunt to Chinatown. She restricts and constraints her anger all the while aware that Silence is the mark of a good Chinese Girl. Eventually, she gives up her silence and confronts the circumstances developing a kind of courage to articulate her feelings.

To conclude, through the interpretation of silence and voice in Kingston’s work, it is clear that Kingston has succeeded in creating many true Chinese women warriors, in the past and the present. Her purpose is to change the traditional images of Chinese women, to improve their social status and to rewrite Chinese women’s history. By writing, Kingston breaks the taboo on silence and rewrites Chinese American female subjectivity in a way that transcends Chinese patriarchal tradition. Just as Ts’ai Yen, her role model, who learns the barbarian’s language and lyrics and then creates a new song for her own people, Kingston masters the English language, uses voice and pen as weapons creating new pages in American literature, and gives the women warriors she writes about places in American history and perhaps immortality. Furthermore, her book can be seen as a new voice, which breaks the silence in the history of Chinese Americans and destroys the Orientalist
stereotypes of Chinese Americans as well as claims rights” and “claims America”, which are the demands of the Chinese Americans for their emerging sense of identity.

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