Chapter-III

Gender in Maxine Hong Kingston's Works

Feminist discourse has been divided on the issue whether women share a common culture or not. The dominant feminist politics presumes a universal identity for all women and believes that gender is an innate essence. They insist on a real or authentic definition of women which ignores the social, cultural and economic differences that give shape to women’s experiences. The theorists that are most associated with universal principle are Mary Daly, Robin Morgan, Adrienne Rich, etc. Virginia Woolf writes in Three Guineas, “as a woman I have no country... As a woman my country is the whole world.”¹ But the whole issue is not that simple. If it had been it would have solved all the miseries and problems of women’s lives. We must be careful while talking about the universal notions of what it means to be a woman. We have to keep in mind various cultural and social realities. Judith Butler suggests that feminism should not insist on the need for articulating a foundationalist frame (the preoccupation with defining an essential and thus unifying characteristic for all women) prior to political action, but rather should recognize that gender identities are constructed through political practice.²

Most of the feminist criticism centers around the Anglo-American and the French criticism. In the Anglo–American model the female author is supposed to give an unmediated expression of experience in an realist text. And the French modernist formalism

"foregrounds literariness and issues of representation, but [which] erases the question of agency altogether."

Scholars are also divided on the issue whether gender is a social construct or a symbolic construct. The symbolists are influenced by the French theory and Lacanian psychoanalysis.

Hélène Cixous considers that the linguistic signs are negative entities, a product of a system of difference. She views the man/woman, masculine/feminine kind of gender difference as the paradigm by which we understand the particular pattern of difference that shapes our symbolic order. According to her the masculine tries to suppress the feminine by placing it opposite to itself. The masculine presents itself as primary and the feminine is relegated to a secondary derivative position. This symbolic law of difference operates in various systems but always "comes back to the man / woman opposition."

The term feminine cannot be singularly defined, there are lot of differences within each sex and every individual. But society plays a major role in the individual's understanding of himself / herself. Rabine is of the view that the "sexed bodies become the visible signs through which a system of hierarchical social roles are enforced by the economics, politics, the family, religion, and institutional constructs, so that individuals whose bodies are visibly marked "female" find themselves forced into oppressive positions." Simone de Beauvoir argues that the physical fact of a woman’s body is not the whole reality to define her. Her role is defined by society which has restricted slots

---

for women in which everybody must fit. Her identity is culturally defined. Hence the proposition, “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman.”

Temma Kaplan opines that it is not possible to think 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.” The veracity of this statement is borne out by the fact that the writings by women give us various, often incompatible, definitions of femininity and also by the fact that these works exhibit great cultural diversity. The fact remains that even though there may be varying social and ethnic experiences, yet male dominance is the common factor that binds all women. Francoise Lionnet is of the opinion that “The women belong to widely different cultural backgrounds—yet they share a profound concern for the rhetoric of selfhood, for the processes of self-reading and self-writing as facilitated or impeded by the style and languages in which they are compelled to write.”

Female experience is not a special kind of psyche or biological gender but the limitations that have been felt by women because of the restrictions imposed on their gender by society, to write as a woman, automatically questions the true status of all those norms held by society. Simone de Beauvoir argues, “… man is defined as a human

---

5 Rabine 473.
being and woman as a female, whenever she behaves as a human being she is said to imitate the male.9

For many women the important link is the disjunction between female identity and the other aspect of cultural heritage.10 Women generally feel themselves divided on the issue of allegiance to their gender or some aspect of their cultural heritage. This may lead to anxiety of identity that is as harmful as the anxiety of authorship.11 Hunt opines that Kingston has “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 this being may be one of the most profound obstacles women face in finding their voices”12 which takes away the women’s sense of legitimacy as writers. Silence has been associated with women and breaking one’s silence has been considered as a part of the feminist tradition. Various scholars and theologians have tried to strengthen this view. According to Erasmus, “Silence garnisheth a woman.” Women were forbidden to speak on religious matters. King Lear laments over dead Cordelia: “Her voice was ever soft,/ Gentle and low, an excellent thing in woman.”13 Silence like chastity has been an essential virtue in women, only the shrews are talkative. At one point Hamlet regrets that he “must like a whore unpack … (his) heart with words /And fall a cursing like a very drab.”14 So all cultures, irrespective of their differences lay stress on the silencing of women. Shirley Nelson Garner opines that for women “... speaking itself becomes an act of assertion. Speaking in public

10 Linda Hunt, “I could not figure out what was my village: Gender vs. Ethnicity in Maxine Hong Kingston’s The Woman Warrior,” MELUS 12 (1985): 11.
12 Hunt 11.
13 Lear 5.3. 274-75.
becomes a radical act – a movement away from women’s role, a vast impropriety.”¹⁵ For many women like Audre Lorde, Adrienne Rich, Tillie Olsen, Maxine Hong Kingston, breaking silence has been a crucial experience. They are constantly haunted by the fear of being relegated to the realm of whores, witches or madwomen.

In its many forms literature also helps in the construction of gender, thus reinforcing social norms. The patriarchal and economic constraints also define a woman’s role within the narrow boundaries.

Estelle Jelinek argues that personal narratives by men and women are fundamentally different. The women emphasize “the personal, ... rather than ... their professional success ... or intellectual history,”¹⁶ and that women’s autobiographies are more fragmentary than men’s. They reflect the “multidimensionality of women’s socially conditioned roles.” On the contrary men write linear and harmonious narrative. But the linear narrative cannot provide the self-image in totality. The Other Self may be portrayed through various narrative techniques. ¹⁷

Similarly French feminist critics such as Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigarary argue that women’s writing is radically different from patriarchal logo-centricism; a female language is “open, non-linear, unfinished, fluid, exploded, fragmented, polysemic attempting to speak the body i.e., the unconscious, involving silence, incorporating the simultaneity of life as opposed to or clearly different from pre-

¹⁴ Hamlet 2.2. 592-93.
¹⁷ Jelinek 17
conceived, oriented, masterly or ‘didactic’ languages.”18 Although many Anglo-American feminist critics such as Nina Baym disagree with this point of view, this can appropriately describe the prose style in *The Woman Warrior*.

It should be kept in mind that although women’s writings are fluid, spontaneous and intuitive, a single notion of feminine experience is highly inadequate to a complex and contradictory activity. Rita Felski, following Alison Jaggar’s formulation of a feminist critical practice, notes that values such as reason, truth, freedom and objectivity are as necessary to the women’s movement and literature as they are to the man’s. In “The Laugh of the Medusa” Hélène Cixous points out, “A feminist text cannot fail to be/more than subversive. It is volcanic/as it is written it brings about an/upheaval of the old property crust/carrier of masculine investments.”19

Thus female experience is not a special kind of psyche or biological condition but limitations that have been felt by women because of the restrictions imposed on their gender by the society. So to write as a woman automatically questions these norms held by society. The marginalised women are doubly-binded by the stigma of race and gender. “This stigma, imposed in a more or less devious way by the social individuals and groups in their efforts to confirm to the idealized images that society upholds as models.”20 Similarly what Elaine Showalter writes is equally applicable to all the minority women writers. She notes, “A black American woman poet, for

example, would have her literary identity formed by the dominant (white male) tradition, by a muted women's culture, and by a muted black culture. She would be affected by both sexual and racial politics in a combination unique to her case; at the same time ... She shares an experience specific to her group.²¹ More often than not the colored and ethnic women are criticized by the members of their own community for selling out. The Aiiieeeee! authors criticize the Chinese–American women writers for reinscribing, "the stereotypically unmanly nature of Chinese–Americans"²² and for portraying divided or dual identities. In the end they canonize thirteen Asian–American writers, all male. Their concept of a writer is typically male.

The writings by most of the Asian-American women writers do not fit in their sociological constraints. Their frustration can be attributed to the homophobia and gender anxiety which can be found in their works. These writers want to throw away the effeminate stereotypes that have stuck to Chinese-American men. They have been trying to fight against racist myths and have in turn been blind towards the oppression of women. In this way they act as their oppressors. On the other hand the Chinese–American feminist writers fight both against the ethnic as well as sexual prejudices. Thus their works are like double-edged swords.

The mainstream culture has seen the Chinese men as asexual, possessing the qualities generally associated with women. And the

²² Aiiieeeee! Xxxi.
Asian-American women have often been thought in clichés, earlier she was considered a depraved prostitute and later on as a docile, meek and efficient office worker. They did not emerge as individuals, but nameless and faceless members of a community. The “sexuality of ‘Oriental’ women, depicted as somehow immoral and different, underlined the ‘heathen’ values of the Chinese and became yet another reason for advocating the exclusion of the Asians. The myth of the ‘erotic Oriental’ and her objectification as a sexual mannequin born of the 1870s racist movement, continues to haunt portrayals of Asian women.”

Elaine H. Kim notes that the stereotype of Asian women as submissive and dainty sex-objects has given rise to an “enormous demand for X-rated films featuring Asian women and emphasis on bondage in pornographic materials about Asian women” and that the popular image of exotic dream girls of the East has created a demand for Oriental bath house workers in the U.S. cities as well as a booming business in mail-order marriages. The immigrant Asian—American women have paid a high price for psychological and physical survival. They resisted the aggression in many ways. Since they are private forms of resistance they are not noticed because of the myth of the passive Asian women.

The Asian-American men were effeminated while the women were ultra feminized. The Aiieeeeed! school dismisses the reality of sexism and gender politics for Chinese-American women. Men are

---

eager to defend their manhood. But in doing so, writers like Chin forget to see the difference between the physical aggression to manly heroism and valor. "The white stereotype of the Asian is unique in that it is the only racial stereotype completely devoid of manhood. Our nobility is that of an efficient house wife. At our worst we are contemptible because we are womanly, effeminate, devoid of all the traditionally masculine qualities of originality, daring, physical courage, creativity. We're neither straight talkin' or straight shootin'. The mere fact that four of the five American-born Chinese-American writers are women reinforces this aspect of the stereotype."25 Thus it seems that the masculine and feminist strains are moving in opposite direction.

Chinese-American women have suffered the 'double bind' of racism and male oppression. Although understanding the male pathos they are angry over their own marginal position and male privileges. King-kok Cheung asks a very relevant question, "Is it not possible for Chinese American men to recover a cultural space without denigrating or erasing 'the feminine'?"26 Kingston’s texts depicts the instability of male and female positions as it does of various literary forms. She remains firmly rooted in the social contexts and reveals how the gender role change across the boundaries and how the distinction between symbolic and social gender changes between cultures. These two kinds of gender not only are interrelated but also illuminate and contradict each other. Kingston does not toy with the idea of a "universal
feminine.”27 There is nothing essentially feminine in her works although gender makes a difference in determining one’s social position as well in power relations. There are strong women like Brave Orchid and Fa MuLan as well as weak willed women like Moon Orchid. Maxine herself remains silent in her American school but is very chirpy in the Chinese school. She also tries to adapt to the ways of mainstream culture and become “American feminine” (TWW, 172).

Gender differences play an important role in her works. *The Woman Warrior* is a book about women and *China Men* is a book about her male ancestors. Rabine is of the view that Kingston seems to emphasize gender boundaries “between the two books all the better to reorganize and play with these boundaries ‘within’ each book.”28 In both of her books one person crosses over into the other gender roles. In *The Woman Warrior* Fa MuLan disguises herself as a man to fight in place of her father. There she goes on to take revenge against the enemies of her village. In *China Men* Tang Ao finds himself on the Land of Women. There he is decorated like a female with his facial hair removed, ears pierced, feet bound, eyebrows plucked. There he is made the courtesan to the queen. Thus Kingston works with the difference between genders as well as difference within each gender. In one of her interviews she says that she had written *The Woman Warrior* and *China Men* together having conceived of them as an interlocking story about the lives of men and women. But the women’s stories “fell into place,” and she feared that the men’s stories were anti-female and will undercut the feminist viewpoint.”29

---

27 Rabine 475.
28 Rabine 475.
She further says, “I feel I have gone as deeply into men’s psyches as I can, and I don’t find them that different. I care about men … as much as I care about women … Given the present state of affairs, perhaps men’s and women’s experiences have to be dealt with separately for now, until more auspicious times are with us.”30 She envisions gender construction as negative and expresses hope to overcome it. These views are in contrast with the vision by Fa MuLan in The Woman Warrior where she considers the gender difference as necessary and important, as the basis of time and movement themselves.

“I saw two people made of gold dancing the earth’s dances. They turned so perfectly that together they were the axis of the earth’s turning. They were light; they were molten, changing gold – Chinese lion dancers, African lion dancers in midstep. I heard high Javanese bells deepen in midring to Indian bells, Hindu Indian, American Indian. Before my eyes, gold bells shredded into gold tassels that fanned in to two royal capes that softened in to lions’ fur. Manes grew tall into feathers that shone – became light rays. Then the dancers danced the future … I am watching the centuries pass in moments Because suddenly I understand time, which is spinning and fixed like the North Star. And I understand how working and hoeing are dancing;

30 Kim 209.
how peasant clothes are golden, as king’s clothes
are golden; how one of the dancers is always a
man and the other a woman” (TWW,27).

Kingston insists on difference rather than separation. Only
difference can make room for “change, motion, integration and
connection to happen.” She plays with differences in them and
narrative structure also. In The Woman Warrior she wrecks vengeance
against the enemies of her family and expresses her anger against the
misogyny practiced by her community. In China Men she reports
against racism that was meted out against her male relatives. She fights
for their honor and for the recognition of the contribution made by
them in the building of America.

The Woman Warrior is a feminist text in the sense that it
constantly constructs the female identity. The first in the series is the
“No Name Woman.”

The book opens with a warning, “You must not tell anyone … ”
(TWW,1) and then leads to both breaking of silence and the telling of a
secret. Her mother tells her the story of the No Name Aunt as a
warning against female sexuality. The aunt is a social rebel who is
punished by the community for her wilful act. Maxine realizes that her
aunt might have got tired of her tradition-bound role and gave way to
her impulses. As all her brothers had gone to America she was the only
one left to take on the duties. The society does not understands that she
can have her needs, even though she is a woman. There is absolutely
no understanding about the female sexuality. Rather it is a thing to be
regulated and feared. Even though the female body has always acted as
source of patrilineal preservation yet it has always remained a potential

31 Rabine 476.
threat of disruption in the society. This story acts as a warning for the daughter against choosing the latter alternative.

The role of the mother is ambiguous. She performs a dual function in the text. Her words enforce patriarchal silences. Sidonie Smith is of the view that the mother is an agency which represents the “erasure of female desire and the denial of female self-representation as the basis on which the perpetuation of patriarchal descent rests.” She warns against the female outlaws and in the reverse process also introduces a wholly different world which is prohibited, a taboo.

Shirley Geok-lin Lim is of the view that this “aunt of unlawful sexuality and shameful suicide is the negative model the mother holds up in order to compel her daughter into compliance with patriarchal constraints on female psychosexual behavior.” In telling the forbidden story to Maxine, the mother herself is breaking the patriarchal injunction. And the daughter continues in the tradition by writing about her forgotten ancestor. This is a two way process, she is following her mother in the sense of breaking the tradition and going against her in breaking her order for silence. The Law of the Father is broken by the mother in telling the story and Maxine carries on the legacy in devoting “pages of paper to her” (TWW, 16). Shirley Geok-lin Lim points out that “No Name Woman is a figure for woman as

that which is displaced by man and from man, a gap in the hisstorical memory.”

Maxine imagines her aunt variously. First she is viewed as a hapless victim, later on as a wilful woman whose priorities were different from that of the social order. Her transgressions exposed the fictivity and vulnerability of patriarchy. The frightened villagers punished her for the “break she had made in the 'roundness'...” (TWW, 13).

Maxine understands that by not talking about her aunt she is participating in her continued punishment. She writes, “I have believed that sex was unspeakable and words so strong and fathers so frail that ‘aunt’ would do my father mysterious harm” (TWW, 15).

She writes, “People who can comfort the dead can also chase after them to hurt them further .... The real punishment was not the raid ... but the family’s deliberately forgetting her” (TWW, 16 ). She refuses to participate in her punishment but she is not completely free of the anxieties. Garner opines that “The punishment implicit in the silence is not merely directed against the aunt, but against women’s sexuality and hence against Kingston herself.”

Maxine, rather women in general, are often reminded that to become an adult is to constantly face danger and guilt. Unlike male counter-parts there is no celebration or ritual at attaining puberty. On the contrary Emma Goldman writes that her mother struck her head across the face and told that “this is necessary for a girl ... when she becomes a woman, as a protection against disgrace.” Garner is of the opinion that, “The guilt and fear

34 Shirley Geok-lin Lim 261.
that the story awakens is not that she is likely to share No-Name Woman’s history, but that she has the potential of sharing it.”

The narrative is full of ambiguity. The constant shift in her point of view suggests her confusion over which side to take. Whether to implicate her culture or not, or whether she is an insider or an outsider. She breaks away from her cultural norms by telling the story. Even though she is strongly attached to her community she cannot take the insults that are hurled on women. Does it mean that to support the rights of women she has to abandon her culture? The choices aren’t attractive on either side. Linda Hunt is of the view that, “If one identifies with the community, she must accept and even endorse her own humiliation at their hands; if she allows herself fully experience the depths of her alienation, she is in danger of being cut off from her cultural roots.”

She preserves her culture by engaging in ancestor worship. The oppressive oral story becomes liberating when written. She writes that other ancestral spirits have “their descent lines providing them with paper suits and dresses, spirit money, paper houses, paper automobiles ... I alone devote pages of paper to her” (TWW, 16). But she also pays homage to a woman who represents a rupture in the descent line, thus destroying the fundamental principle. She identifies herself with her aunt thus thinking herself in her line. She breaks the patriarchal order by giving her voice and by writing or giving birth, to a book. Like her aunt she crosses boundaries in the sense that she wants to break away and come back to her family. She loves and rejects her mother, family and community.

37 Garner 121.
38 Hunt 7.
Maxine also notes that this "rare urge west" (TWW, 8) has lead her aunt to eternal loneliness, to fear and death. She kills herself and the child. In a way she returns to the filial order by erasing the source of contamination and then by being silent for ever. Her story can be interpreted in many ways. She commits suicide by jumping in to the well, thus contaminating the water. The well represents a circle, and she has disrupted it and polluted the water that nourishes the family. She also takes with her the name of the father of the child, thus leaving the father clueless and erasing the paternal origin. Her aunt is a kind of antiheroine. Her silence acts like a weapon, it is like a tool of vengeance.

No Name Aunt rejects the actions and boundaries of female space. She rejected the protected space of her house, sheltered by walls within walls and choose the other option to rebel. So she is a deviant who must be punished. Her story is used to define boundaries.

A Chinese working woman Ning Lao Táitái sums up the role of an individual, especially women in a typical communal set up. "Life must go on. The generations stretch back thousands of years to the great ancestor parents. They stretch for thousands of years into the future, generation upon generation. Seen in proportion to this on the other hand no individual can drop out. Each is a link in the great chain. A woman stands with one hand grasping the generations that have gone before and with the other the generations to come. It is her common destiny with all women."39 And as Mao puts it, "A man in China is usually subject to the domination of three systems of authority (political authority, clan authority, and religious authority) ... As for

women, in addition to being dominated by these three systems of authority they are also dominated by men.40

The work of preserving familial, cultural and society’s values is attributed to women. If they come out of their assigned roles, it would disrupt the continuity of the family. The value of women depend upon their obedience, passivity and the maintenance of the traditional roles. These are the values which the mother wants to give to her daughter. The other reason can be that since Brave Orchid has seen the consequences of disobedience she does not want her daughter to share the same fate. She is passing on the techniques of survival and the daughter understands that, “The work of preservation demands that feelings playing about in one’s guts not be turned into action. Just watch their passing like cherry blossoms” (TWW, 8). Suzanne Juhasz opines that the daughter’s story, “both deepens her connection to her female heritage and creates some separation from it and thereby control over it.”41 So to find a role model as well as to be loyal to the community she places the story of the heroic Fa MuLan against her aunt’s story. Although Chinese culture is patriarchal, it provides enough space for women to act heroically for the benefit of the community. Through her story the narrator tries to transcend the degrading female social role.

Again this story is told/given by the mother. Her mother gives her another choice, of becoming a warrior, a heroine. In “White Tigers” she imagines herself to be Fa MuLan. Thus she can escape the

traditional confines of a woman. She can enter the world of heroes and warriors. Through this she wants to fulfil the desires of her parents thus showing a desire to be accepted by the community. Maxine imagines herself as the swords-woman who is trained to be a harbinger of justice as well as the model of perfect filiality. Before she leaves her home, her parents carve many grievances on her back. In Maxine’s / Kingston’s world warrior is created through the mastering of language.

The woman warrior has her education at a place where the difference between male and female is not delineated. Her tutors, one of them is a male and another female, teach her the skills of the animals and to learn from nature. At this place, her entrance into puberty is considered as natural. She is not taught to be ashamed of female sexuality and consider herself contaminated and polluted. But this type of education leaves her entirely subordinate to the wishes of her family. She is told to be perfectly filial. Thus when she watches her own wedding ceremony being performed (of course, in her absence) in the gourd, she is passive. This type of education conforms patriarchy instead of threatening it. Malini Schueller points out at a complex structure of the narrative, “The girl leaves her family to seek her future alone but finds solace in a substitute household; the new family invites her to transgress her traditional role as a female and become a fighter, but the purpose of this transgression is to fight barbarians … and she must always maintain strict filiality.”

Kingston tries to go beyond the gender roles. The man and the woman who teach the narrator symbolize perennial, natural forces, changing but always in harmony. The couple often appears like young

---

42 Schueller, “Questioning Race and Gender Definitions,” 425.
lovers. But to Maxine the couple appears like brother and sister. Thus Kingston problematizes traditional gender roles. This description becomes the first move in questioning gender hierarchies.

When she returns home, she is welcomed like a man. “My parents killed a chicken and steamed it whole, as if they were welcoming home a son” (TWW, 34). The point is that as a woman she has no honorable place in society. When she goes on a war, she has to dress like a male. She has to efface her sexuality. She replaces her father in the battle and kills all the enemies of the family, all this done disguised as a man. If she is discovered she will be killed, “Chinese executed women who disguised themselves as soldiers or students, no matter how bravely they fought or how high they scored on the examinations” (TWW, 39). The society, even when it most needs, is not ready to accept a woman who transgresses her social role, hence the disguise. Another hierarchy is subverted in the sense that in the original myth the words were carved on the back of a male warrior. In traditional Chinese culture literacy has always been associated with manhood.

Though she does not repress her sexual desire, she has to hide it. She has to hide her pregnancy behind the armor. Her back is wounded by the words inscribed by the father, which tells the stories of the cruelties that have been committed on them and her belly is large with a male heir who will ensure the continuance of patriarchy. After taking her revenge, the woman warrior returns home to assume her real duties as a woman, to unmask herself. All her possibilities end over here and from now onwards she will assume the role of a silenced wife. She kneels before her parents-in-law, “Now my public duties are finished … I will stay with you, doing farm work and housework, and giving
you more sons” (TWW, 45). Now she will not be heard anymore. Sidonie Smith argues that, “Fa MuLan’s name, unlike the name of no-name aunt is passed on from generation to generation, precisely because the lines of her story as woman warrior … reproduce an androcentric paradigm of identity and selfhood and thereby serve the symbolic order in ‘perfect filiality’.”

Hunt is of the view that, “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 community.”

Kingston is critical of the way Chinese society treats the women and the issue of female anger—when she faces the baron he tries to convince her and appeals to her “man to man.” When she questions him of his cruelty and crimes towards women, he tries to shrug it away by saying, “Oh, come now. Everyone takes the girls when he can. The families are glad to be 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” (TWW, 43). Thus Maxine/Kingston makes it obvious that she cannot compromise on this issue. The baron tries to make a compromise on the misogynist basis and this is one thing that she cannot reconcile with. She cannot overlook the patriarchal basis of the Chinese culture. Bobby Fong is of the opinion that, “The story of Fa MuLan magnifies the young Maxine’s doubts rather than giving her strength.”

Malini Schueller points out that “the legend of the swords-

---

43 Smith 1065.
44 Hunt 8.
woman becomes the personal story of the Chinese-American girl enraged at the misogynist proverbs she constantly hears in the immigrant community.'46

At the seams of the Fa MuLan story is tucked another story of subversive female avengers. As a swordswoman she has released many whimpering women from the baron’s captivity. These females who make “insect noises and … blink weakly … like pheasants that have been raised in the dark for soft meat … 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 not one claimed any” (TWW, 44). With no place to go, these women turn into “witch amazons” who killed men and boys. They avenge not the wrongs of fathers or brothers but they kill them. They bought daughters and turned them against the phallic order. These amazons represent violent woman warriors which are not acceptable in the kind of social structure which Fa MuLan represents. They were not motivated by any idealism but they were mercenaries and they did not dress like men. They rode as women and many daughters-in-law ran to them for refuge.

Kingston does not feel comfortable with this myth as this just subverts the pattern of male dominance. What Maxine is looking for is the equality of status, not the subverting of the hierarchies. She distances herself from the myth, “it would be said,” “people would say,” and ends up with, “I myself never encountered such women and could not vouch for their reality” (TWW, 44-45). The problem before

46 Schueller 427.
the female avenger is that she does not know whether she should be an avenger who is a female or the avenger of females. Kingston makes one point clear that if the women identify themselves with the injustices suffered by their community they will have to ignore the cruelties that they, as women, have suffered at the hands of the society.

In the next chapter “Shaman” she takes up the life of her mother Brave Orchid. Infact the book’s main concern is the stories about daughters and mothers. Shirley Geok-lin Lim points out that it is a “daughtery text, bypassing the father’s position, and inscribing in its place a woman’s text.” She47 Her mother’s life comes quite close to the heroic model prescribed by the society. Her mother is the woman warrior in the real world of limited possibilities. Brave Orchid combats the loneliness that she has to suffer when her husband has gone to America. Her two children die and she is left alone in a big family consisting of her in-laws. She decides to join a medical school. In the school she is allotted some space of her own and for the first time she enjoys the privacy however limited it is. At one time her friends call her spirit back by shouting her directions, “They called out their own names, women’s pretty names, haphazard names, horizontal names of one generation” (TWW, 75-76).

Maxine portrays her mother as bold and heroic. She is one of the “new women scientists who changed the rituals” (TWW, 75). She awfully describes her mother’s encounter with the Sitting Ghost. Sidonie Smith is of the view that, “The ensuing battle between woman and ghost unfolds as a primal struggle with the dynamics and the rhythms of an attempted rape.”48 Initially she is too weak to resist the

47 Shirley Geok-lin Lim 259.
48 Smith 1067.
Ghost but ultimately she wins over him by the power of her words, taunting him into submission. This is not her only encounter with a ghost, she keeps on facing ghosts or strangers whenever she goes out to work. Similarly Showalter talks about the muted culture of women, “the boundaries of those culture and reality overlap, but are not wholly contained by, the dominant (male) group.”49 Like all other heroes Brave Orchid is bold towards food, too. Sidonie Smith comments that “they demonstrate by their gustatory feats their power over the natural world, their high degree of aristocratic cultivation, and their association with the sacred.”50

Kingston is awed when her mother says, “I am brave and good. Also I have bodily strength and control. Good people do not lose to ghosts” (TWW, 73). Not only Maxine, but she overawed many people in this way. She impressed her class-mates by studying secretly at night. “She quickly built a reputation for being brilliant, a natural scholar who could glance at a book and know it” (TWW, 63). After completing her course, she returns to her village. She dressed elegantly when ever she went out, she “wore a silk robe and western shoes with big heels, and she rode home carried in a sedan chair” (TWW, 76). She never dressed less elegantly and by avoiding to treat the terminally ill, she built her reputation of being a good doctor.

After her husband summons her to America, her life changes. In the new conditions she is no longer a respected doctor but an illiterate woman. She gives birth to six children after the age of forty-five. The heroic aspect of her mother’s personality is foreign to Maxine. All the heroic deeds have been performed in the far off lands of China. She

---

49 Showalter 263.
50 Smith 1078.
has always known her mother to be a hardworking laundress. Her mother is not happy with her situation. Stories are the only means by which she can tell her children about her extraordinary life. Sidonie Smith notes, “Significantly, the dynamics of the mother’s fate recall those of Fa MuLan’s: Adventures concluded, both return to the home of the husband as wife and slave, there to become the subject of wonderful tales of an earlier glory in a faraway place.” 51 Here Kingston wants to show that the woman warrior model can work for some women. Brave Orchid fits exactly in the heroic pattern prescribed by the Chinese society.

Brave Orchid does not try to change the social norms regarding the vulnerability of the female sex. Rather she becomes one of its agents. Young Maxine fears that whenever she goes to China, she will be sold as a slave. And these fears are not groundless. Brave Orchid has been involved in the purchasing of a slave girl. Brave Orchid practiced female infanticide. Thus, young Maxine imagines that being a female is a kind of deformity. Brave Orchid feels the need to save her cultural traditions from the western “ghosts.” So she tries to pass the puzzling maze of the Chinese culture, which are often based on contradiction and silence, and the values which are often oppressive for women.

Maxine is confused on the question of identifying herself with the mother. These confused feelings leave behind a sense of displacement in the narrator. She feels a stranger in her own family and the immigrant community. She is afraid and lonely. Sidonie Smith comments, “Paradoxically, her mother, the Shaman with the power of word and food, has, instead of inspiring her daughter to health and

51 Smith 1068.
heroism, made the daughter, sick, hungry, vulnerable, fearful.” For the daughter, her mother becomes a kind of ghost. She recalls, “My mother would sometimes be a large animal, barely real in the dark; then she would become mother again” (TWW, 101). This comment comes in the end of the section. Suddenly we are reminded of the haunted room of the medical college. And the daughter’s method of confronting the ghost is same as that of the mother – she confronts it with words. She presents an alternate view before her mother. And now the mother is an old woman, tired and disillusioned. Thus, like all other legendary figures, Maxine demystifies Brave Orchid.

But on the whole there are some points on which she can identify with her mother. While saying her good night her mother calls her “Little Dog” (TWW, 109). It was an endearment which had been unuttered for years. Her mother releases her daughter to find her own identity. Maxine feels free and at this moment she affectionately identifies with her mother, “I am really a Dragon, as she is a Dragon, both of us born in dragon years. I am practically a first daughter of a first daughter” (TWW, 109). There is one more point of similarity, both the mother and daughter are always working and now are old. The real and imaginary tales of Brave Orchid make her a complete person in the eyes of her daughter. She is a kind of personality of which Maxine is proud of and which is necessary for her to reject and move on. Although they may have separate identities yet they have the connection, however uncomfortable, and inspite of the fact that the daughter has gone on her own way.

The next chapter “At the Western Palace” is created out of a single line and she has not used her mother’s interpretation. Maxine’s

52 Smith 1068.
sister told her that their brother “drove Mom and Second Aunt to Los Angeles to see Aunt’s husband who’s got the other wife” (TWW, 163). Moon Orchid is very unlike her sister, she represents her name. She is a decorative satelite that takes its definition from somebody else, that is her husband. In a way she represents the traditional Chinese woman, a kind of woman Brave Orchid always alludes to in her stories and a kind of woman Maxine dreads to become. For thirty years she is happy in receiving a cheque from her husband. She is as opposite to Brave Orchid as she could be. She is a little dim-witted, self-effacing, a weakling, decorative. She is as useless and graceful as the paper cutouts that she got from China. The woman of sixty spends her days following other people or by telling about their actions. Although humorous, there is a touch of sadness about this woman who does not have a life of her own.

The heroic model may not be useful for all women. Brave Orchid’s younger sister does not have that mutual capability and strength to live up to the heroic norms. She does not mind that her husband is married in America or that he has never come to see her and their daughter. Brave Orchid goads her to come to America and lay claim on her husband. Brave Orchid assumes that her sister’s bigamous husband and his wife will accept her as she is the first wife. The old Chinese tradition provided some security to women. But Brave Orchid’s thinking is quite useless in the American context. On the contrary she drives her sister to madness as she does not have the same strength and will that Brave Orchid possesses.

Maxine realizes that myths have to change according to the places. And the woman warrior model may not work for all women.
Maxine cannot follow the myth blindly. She will have to make the changes according to her needs.

Maxine parallels madness with silence. In this chapter when Moon Orchid faces her husband she cannot utter a word. Even though Brave Orchid, like Maxine instigating the Chinese girl, pinches her cheeks and slaps the inside of her arms, all she can do is to “open and shut her mouth without any words coming out” (TWW, 152). Later on Moon Orchid becomes mad and dies in a mental institution. Through her Maxine makes us to understand that for a society a woman’s emotional needs are nothing, all she can want is good money and servants to look after her when she is old. Her husband tells her that she was well treated as nobody stoned her, she got money and lived easily.

Her husband erases her existence by denying her. She becomes “… people in a book I had read a long time ago” (TWW, 154). The whole basis on which Moon Orchid’s life is based on is shattered. He dissolves the fiction on which she has based her life. After that she appears “ small in the corner of the seat” (TWW,150 ). She stops talking and later on stops eating. She vanishes in to a world of madness, imaginative threats which will totally efface her. She imagines that the Mexicans will kidnap her and then they, “would take us in air planes and fly us to Washington D.C., where they’d turn us into ashes … drop the ashes in the wind, leaving no evidence” (TWW, 159). Thus she dreads from the male world outside and seeks respite in her sister’s home. Having been cast out of patrilineal existence, she needs her sister to protect her. She turns the house into a box, a living coffin, by shutting all the windows, doors etc. Later on Brave Orchid commits her to an institution where she can find company with other
women similar to her. There she finds her identity as a mother and her “daughters” never vanish. They are always there and she needn’t bother. The association of women with madness is shown as an alternative to their achievement of identity.

In this narrative, we see a new face of Brave Orchid. Apart from being a Shaman, she is a traditional Chinese woman, who would like to preserve her cultural identity, even when she is thousands of miles away. By this approach she makes many people unhappy, including her niece who is trapped in a loveless marriage and in a way she is responsible for the madness of Moon Orchid. She fails to understand that her myths fail of reference to any reality and how misplaced they are. She tells her sister a story about the Empress of the Western Palace. She narrates, “the emperor had four wives, one at each point of the compass, and they lived in four palaces ... The Empress of the West has imprisoned the Earth’s Emperor in the Western Palace. And you, the good Empress of the East, come out of the dawn to invade her land and free the Emperor. You must break the strong spell she has cast on him that has lost him the East” (TWW, 143).

The reality is quite the opposite. The Empress of the West does not want power, infact she is not aware of the other Empress. The Emperor does not want to come back and the Empress of the East does not has power enough to break the spell. But Brave Orchid does not understand all this. What she understands is only the convention. Sidonie Smith points out, “Kingston creates a Brave Orchid bested in the genre of fictionalization. The husband has turned the two sisters into characters from a book read long ago, a devastating recapitulation of their efforts to turn him into the fictional Emperor.”

[53 Smith 1071.]
these fictionalization does not destroy Brave Orchid as she is brave, clever and willful, it has destroyed other women’s lives. She fails to make room for female subjectivity in other and unfamiliar landscapes. She remains insensitive to her daughter’s desire.

The mother has been compared to Fa MuLan. But Fa MuLan remains in the domain of the mind and when she is put into real life in the form of Brave Orchid the action becomes a little comic. Like Fa MuLan plans to avenge her family and village, Brave Orchid also plans to avenge her sister. Her plans are backfired and her children cling back in shame. Thus Maxine suggests that myths and legends can and cannot be interpreted as analogies for experience.

The next chapter “A Song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe” explores the subjectivity of the daughter. Maxine’s childhood had been nowhere near to the elegance of a Fa MuLan’s. The prose is quite the opposite to that of the poetic prose of the “White Tigers.” She tries to defy all the traditional conventions about the female role. She refuses to cook, breaks dishes, screams, picks up her nose while serving food, tells her parents and their friends that she will rather be a lumberjack. She gets straight As. She tries to gain love and acceptance of her community. But myths are myths. Maxine’s parents are irritated by her and they try to snub her. She is nowhere near to getting the love of her parents by acting this way. Like the warrior this profession is considered unsuitable for females. Surprisingly China fills in her mind the image of a warrior. On the other hand America offers a realistic career. Brave Orchid told her to learn to type if she wanted to become an American girl.

Maxine voices her fury against her culture. She tells us that as a teenager she had many grievances which she wanted to tell to her
mother. But nobody was interested. She could not express herself for a long time as she could not decide that as an insider what her reaction should be. Her list of injustices remind us of the list of grievances carved out on the back of the legendary swords-woman. Right from her childhood she found the task of talking very difficult. She blamed it on her mother as she thinks that she has cut the frenum of her tongue so that she should not talk. On the other hand her mother tells her that she has done it so that her tongue could move in any language. Thus her mother, even though she encourages patriarchal norms, encourages her to be a champion.
talker like herself. But Maxine takes time to find a voice. For a long time, may be even now, she feels that she has got an ugly voice, “A dumbness – a shame still cracks my voice in two, even when I want to say ‘hello’ casually, or ask an easy question in front of the check-out counter or ask directions of a bus driver … A telephone call makes my throat bleed and takes up that day’s courage. It spoils my day with self disgust when I hear my broken voice come skittering out into the open” (TWW, 165).

Rabine notes that, “while many of the ‘talk – stories’ in Kingston’s books express the pleasure by which they were written, many scenes that represent talking in The Woman Warrior associate it or its mirror opposite, the impossibility of talking – with the most painful memories of childhood.”54 While describing her girlhood, in opposition to her fantasy of herself as Fa MuLan she describes how at the most painful moments the words won’t come out, “When one of my parents or the emigrant villagers said, ‘Feeding girls is feeding cowbirds,’ I would thrash on the floor and scream so hard I could not talk” (TWW, 46). Unlike the woman warrior she is unable to find her voice against the racist bosses or the city officials. The only thing she could do was to squeak and whisper “in my bad, small person’s voice that makes no impact” (TWW, 48). Rabine further notes that “The injustice of talk and the pain of silence as represented by the text contrast with the rebellious power of the text itself as it transforms talk and ‘talk story’ into writing.”55

For Maxine silence is a kind of punishment that leads to madness. She has to break this silence in order to maintain her sanity,

54 Rabine 490.
55 Rabine 491.
“I thought every house had to have its crazy woman or crazy girl, every village its idiot: Who would be It at our house? Probably me … [T]here were adventurous people inside my head to whom I talked” (TWW, 189-90).

Silence is related to masochism and madness. She persecutes a Chinese girl because she reminds her of her own silence. No doubt, the girl is Maxine ‘s alter ego. Maxine gets irritated by the girl who would whisper–read but not talk. “Her whisper was as soft as if she had no muscles. She seemed to be breathing from a distance. I heard no anger or tension” (TWW, 173). She torments the girl and tries to cajole her by saying , “You are going to talk … I am going to make you talk, you sissy girl” (TWW, 175). Clearly Maxine relate her own inability to speak with that of the helpless girl. But the girl would not speak, no matter how much Maxine irritates her. The little Chinese girl can be associated with the no name aunt. Her helplessness makes Maxine hate her more.

This incident represents Maxine’s confusion about speechlessness. She writes, “Most of us eventually found some voice, however faltering. We invented an American-feminine speaking personality, except for that one girl…”(TWW, 172). She hates her useless delicacy, neat clothes, her hair cut, her teeth and fleshy skin like a tracing paper. Maxine yells at her, “You are a plant … That’s all you are if you don’t talk. If you don’t talk, you can’t have a personality. You’ll have no personality and … a brain” (TWW, 180). Maxine’s violence against this girl represents her own frustration at being speechless. The girl reminds her of her own self. She is reacting against herself. To comfort herself, Maxine takes pride in her yellow teeth, dirty nails, calloused hands. But she understands that the points
of similarity are more than that of difference. This is what she is fighting against.

After the incident she remains ill for eighteen months. In a way she becomes a plant like that Chinese girl. She admits, “It was the best year and a half of my life. Nothing happened” (TWW, 182). She is immensely relieved at not to be in public gaze, at being silent. Now she does not have to prove anything to anybody. She is out of the public eye and she enjoys the quite luxury of not being expected to do anything. She does not know whether to be Chinese - feminine or American - feminine. She starts talking more softly than the Americans. As a Chinese she is afraid of revealing her community’s secrets to the white majority and she is equally scared of the Chinese, who “want to capture your voice for their own use. They want to fix up your tongue to speak for them” (TWW, 169).

Both the American and the Chinese traditions denigrate women. They are not given full opportunities to realize a potent identity. The female is considered as passive and dependent. Their goals are considered to be different from men. Sue Ann Johnston believes that “America’s antipathy toward the feminine is seen as more soul destroying than traditional Chinese misogyny.”

She also does not want to repeat her mother’s words because they don’t fit in the other culture. The other culture does not understand its implications. Besides the mother’s rituals are not significant in the other landscape. But she stubbornly adheres to them, thus making her children the butt of jokes.

Maxine is aware of the crazy women in the neighborhood. She writes, “I thought talking and not talking made the difference between sanity and insanity. Insane people were the one’s who couldn’t explain themselves. There were many crazy girls and women” (TWW, 186). There follows a battle of words between the daughter and the mother and symbolically the daughter cuts off the mother’s words by saying, “I don’t want to listen to any more of your stories; they have no logic” (TWW, 202). For Maxine breaking the web of silence means to become an adult, a writer and a woman warrior. It means to acquire a new self and is a kind of rite of passage. Becoming a woman warrior is not easy, she has to fight the inside as well as outside oppression. She continues her war by writing, as her mother broke the traditional mode by becoming a doctor. The mother teaches her daughter the art of storytelling thus giving her means to be a woman warrior.

Rabine notes that, “the narrator of The Woman Warrior weaves her ambivalence to her community and culture into her ambivalence toward her mother who communicates to her the culture and its myths and who interprets the community for her.” The adult Maxine is unable to reconcile to the thought of her leaving the mother, “How can I bear to leave her again?” (TWW, 100). On the same side she just wishes to be away from her “ ‘When I’m away from here’ I had to tell her, ‘I don’t get sick … I can breathe … I’ve found some places in this country that are ghost free. And I think I belong there” (TWW, 108) but the influence of her mother is to be seen everywhere.

The mother-daughter relationship is also explained through various metaphors especially by the figure of the forbidden stitch.

---

Rabine 179.
Maxine writes, “There was one knot so complicated that it blinded the knot-maker. Finally an emperor outlawed this cruel knot, and the nobles could not order it any more. If I had lived in China, I would have been an outlawed knot-maker” (TWW, 163). Shirley Geok-lin Lim opines that the “metaphor of the knot covers the making of the mother/daughter relationship in the text, a figure so tightly and complexly tied that the greatest skill will be needed to unknot it.” The metaphor is also implied in the cutting of Maxine’s tongue by her mother. One may believe that this is the image of silencing but actually the mother cuts the frenum of her daughter’s tongue “so that you would not be tongue-tied” (TWW, 164). The daughter is both awed and inspired by her mother’s action. “Sometimes I felt very proud that my mother committed such a powerful act upon me. At other times I was terrified … Did it hurt me? Did I cry and bleed?” (TWW, 164).

Sidonie Smith is of the opinion that Kingston’s mother dominates the “life, the landscape, and the language of the text as she dominates the subjectivity of the daughter who writes that text.” She gives her daughter the power of storytelling. It is through storytelling that “Brave Orchid passes on to her daughter all the complexities of and the ambivalence about mother’s and daughter’s identity as woman in patriarchal culture.” There is a psychic bonding between the mother and daughter through gender, talk-story traditions. Talk story becomes a fluid and interactive mode of communication for the daughter and the mother. It becomes a way for fighting against the odds, the real or imaginary ghosts and to realize themselves as women

58 Shirley Geok-lin Lim 262.
59 Smith 1059.
and individuals in the society. Both the mother and daughter share the dual powerlessness as women and as a minority. The internal world of the family oppresses women and the external world is equally hostile, rather hostile to the family as a whole.

In a way the talk-stories are used to give vent to the inner feelings, finding a way out of silence and stereotypes and exploring images to how they feel, think and act. The daughter realizes her power as a story teller. She is not just a storehouse for her mother’s stories, nor is she a double for her mother. Wendy Ho opines that “In working out her identity, there is as much active collaboration / bonding as there is brutal resistance / disengagement between mother and daughter.”60

There is a sense of separation from the mother despite the fluid ego boundaries. She is a new voice branching out of her mother, questions the stereotypes and fictions and her voice judgements. Their stories reveal that they are similar and different in multiple ways. The great heroic deeds that the mother mentions seem comic in real life. To take a sword to her boss is a comic and pathetic scenario. There are no pole fighters, no self - sacrificing rabbits or martial training in wilderness of real life a young Chinese-American may find herself. She must take the revenge by words. “It is the language of contradiction and the language of sexism and racism – painful, ugly words which maim and kill - that she as a warrior attempts to purge, to decapitate with violent vengeance …”61

97

---

61 Wendy Ho 234.
patriarchal home is the wilderness that Maxine must explore. That is a kind of female space that will displace male power.

The narrative of *The Woman Warrior* is marked with double voicing. The narrator while narrating the story relives the negative feelings she had for her family and community. But she cannot deny the positive values that she had gained from her culture. She wants to break away and come back to her roots.

She writes, “… I had to get out of hating and I refuse to shy my way anymore through our Chinatown, which tasks me with the old saying and the stories. The swordswoman and I are not so dissimilar. May my people understand the resemblance soon so that I can return to them” (TWW, 52-53).

These two voices never meet, yet they cannot separate from each other as Maxine cannot part herself from her mother, family or community. But the “woman hatred” practiced by her culture provides little relief. She writes, “Living among one’s own emigrant villagers can give a good Chinese far from China a glory and place. But I am useless, one more girl who couldn’t be sold” (TWW, 52). Instead of giving love the community makes the young narrator feel claustrophobic.

She would like to stand with her family and fight against the common enemy. She wants her community to make space for her anger and energy. But the enemy is not easy to identify as it is in the fairy tale. She cannot meet “eye to eye” her racist boss who is “two feet taller than I am” (TWW, 48). Her small voice makes no impact on
any body. At this moment Maxine can only think, “If I took the sword, which my hate must surely have forged out of the air, and gutted him, I would put color and wrinkles into his shirt” (TWW, 49). Fa MuLan would have certainly gone for the head.

Maxine closes the book with two stories. One is mother’s and the other is hers. Here Maxine realized her identification with her mother. Her mother tells her the story of Maxine’s grandmother, who was a strong, wilful and brave woman, who believed that “our family was immune to harm as long as they went to plays” (TWW, 207). Her mother’s story presents women as vulnerable as well as fierce.

If the book begins with the mother’s story of female captivity and shame, it ends on a note of harmony with a story told by the daughter, a story which “translated well” (TWW, 209).

Ts’ai Yen was forced to live among the barbarians. Her kids do not know Chinese and make fun of her. But later on she discovers that the barbarians also have refined sensibilities. So through the language of art, she is able to find something common with them, she can sing to their tunes. She gave posterity her songs of sadness, loneliness and wandering. In a way it is a tale of Brave Orchid who finds herself in a hostile environment. Maxine’s mother thinks that her daughter has gone to live out in the barbarians but the fact remains that she, like Ts’ai Yen has been forced to live among the barbarians and sing songs of the homeland. The mother and daughter can fit in this legend. Rabine opines that the “fantasy of the legendary poetess is on a formal level a fantasy of transforming the conflict from pain into beauty and from paralysis into harmonious movement. Like the myth of the empress in relation to Moon Orchid’s American experience the alternating form of the Ts’ai Yen analogy distorts the relationship.
between mother and daughter but also clarifies a not-yet-existing possibility.\(^ {62}\)

In *The Woman Warrior* Kingston creates for herself an intellectual and feminist image. But in *China Men* she spoke of women marginalized by the patriarchal history of the Chinese-Americans. *China Men* is a book about men written by a woman “a spokeswoman who voices her fellow men’s valor and anger and redeems them from cultural misconception and historical obscurity.”\(^ {63}\)

But even in this book that is supposedly about men we become aware of the fact that although women are fragmented and diminished by the double oppression of patriarchy and racial discrimination yet the women are the real history makers. Alfred S. Wang points out that the history of the Chinese male in America has not been dealt with honestly or profoundly in literature until the publication of Kingston’s *China Men*.\(^ {64}\)

Most of the stories about men have been reported by women. At the time when the men were busy making new myths, women kept the continuity from the past. Qing-yun Wu points out that, “it is through the mother’s mouths and by Kingston’s pen that the ability of Chinese-American men to adapt and transform, their nobility and humiliation, their hard-working spirit and love for peace, and their pursuit of liberty

---

62 Rabine 486.
63 David Lewei Li, “*China Men*: Maxine Hong Kingston and the American Canon,” *American Literary History* 2:3 (Fall, 1990): 488.
and happiness are preserved in a breathing movement, simultaneously history and fiction."\textsuperscript{65}

\textit{China Men} saw a gradual transformation of Kingston in to "the kind of woman who loves men and who can tell their stories."\textsuperscript{66} Through this strategy she can tell men’s stories from her point of view, a female’s. Thus she acquires patriarchal power of writing to subvert the gender definitions. Rabine comments, "\textit{China Men} is about men who have been forced to cross over into the feminine gender is written by a woman, who, in the act of writing has also like the woman warrior, “crossed over, albeit voluntarily, into the masculine gender and assumed the voice of the men she writes about."\textsuperscript{67} In a way this book is a rebellion against the silencing of men and celebration of talkative women who could narrate the men’s stories. Now the women’s words will give their ancestors immortality. She uses feminist strategies to divulge the oppression of China Men.

In \textit{China Men} the men long to go home as they are tired of the racism and hatred they have to encounter. They yearn for the love and attention that they get at home. These men have been stereotyped as having the feminine quality and there are at least two stories in \textit{China Men} where men cross over into the feminine role. Even the narrator assumes the role of a warrior, supposedly a masculine field and tries to give them voice. These men wander in search for home, to have no home is to cross over into the feminine gender. In one sense the experiences of men and women are mutually exclusive.

\textsuperscript{65} Qing-yun Wu, "A Chinese Reader’s Response to Maxine Hong Kingston’s \textit{China Men}," \textit{MELUS} 17:3 (Fall 1991-92): 93.
\textsuperscript{66} King-kok Cheung 241.
\textsuperscript{67} Rabine 480.
The “Land of Women” is the thematic fable which is very significant to the whole book. A China Man becomes an other in this land. Tang Ao is transformed into an Oriental courtesan, his lips are sewn so that he can only utter out “a wordless male scream” (CM, 13). The cracking of foot bones signify the physical sufferings of the forefathers who landed in America in search of a new life. Tang Ao pleads to have his feet rebound, this shows the enslaved spirit. Feminism considered to be lower in patriarchal order is enforced on the immigrant men. Thus Kingston defamiliarizes the patriarchal order by reversing sex roles.

Tang Ao symbolizes the Chinese male sojourners in America. “Some scholars say that that country was discovered during the reign of Empress Wu (AD 694-705), and some say earlier than that, AD 441, and it was in North America” (CM,5). The exclusionary laws had forced these Chinese men in to servile feminine positions of powerlessness and gave them menial feminine jobs. Tang Ao is demoted in gender hierarchies. He was not willing, infact nobody is willing, to fill the position of a female. Like no-name aunt who has a “rare urge west” (TWW,8), Tang Ao also crosses an ocean and his gender is reversed. Just as the aunt is powerless, similarly Tang Ao is driven to silence and powerlessness by the laws of the land.

Kingston writes against the cruel laws, some critics misunderstand her purpose. It is sometimes assumed that she favors the traditional patriarchal Confucianism. Linda Chin Sledge notes, “The inversion of sexual roles (in China Men )... illuminates the internal tensions accumulating in (sojourner ) families as a result of the
father’s emasculation or failure as provider is clear. But she goes on to conclude that Kingston gives “an overwhelmingly heroic account of sojourner family life …” Through-out *China Men* the continuing hold of certain fundamental aspects of the primordial Confucian ideal of family unity … Rather than undermining the ancient notion of family accord, the scenes show faith in the patriarchal family system …”

Critics tend to think that she is idolizing traditional Chinese culture. Kingston both criticizes the racist society as well as the Confucian patriarchy. King-kok Cheung notes, “I cannot but see this legend as double-edged, pointing not only to the mortification of Chinese men in the new world but also the subjugation of women both in old China and in America.” This opening myth suggests that Kingston is angry at her community for ill-treating women as well as at the kind of racist treatment that was meted out at her forefathers. In general circumstances law is the center of male symbolic order. But the China Men are victimized by the law of the majority. Thus the position of power is reverted and they are forced into the feminine positions of inferiority. They have to do women’s work. They are given the menial jobs and at home they have to cook, wash dishes and clothes, works traditionally associated with women. When Brave Orchid comes to America she assumes all these roles and men don’t have to do it anymore.

Kingston imagines her father’s journey to the West. He leaves for Gold Mountain, like a bride who leaves for her husband’s home. For that he had to change his name - a situation faced by women. And

---

69 Linda Chin Sledge 13-14.
70 King-kok Cheung 240.
during the journey he is enclosed in sealed crate. He cannot look outside. Similarly a bride travels in a closed palanquin, and she is not able to see anything about where she is going. Her father is apprehensive and frightened about his future just like a bride must experience when she goes to live with a man she does not know.

But all these experiences do not make the men more sympathetic towards the women. When in Angel Island, the men are housed on a floor below the Chinese women it is considered: “Diabolical, inauspicious beginning - to be trodden over by women. ‘Living under women’s legs,’ said the superstitious old-fashioned men from the backward villages ... No doubt the demons had deliberately planned the humiliation” (CM,55). The treatment these men had to suffer in America, they themselves had been perpetuating from the centuries on the women. And this is true for women of all races. Their humiliation does not enable them to look on the subjugation of women with sympathy. Rather they try to dominate and denigrate a group that they consider to be weaker and lower than themselves.

There is sympathy not in America but in traditional China. Maxine’s paternal grandfather desired a daughter so much that he traded his fourth son, Maxine’s father, for a daughter. Now this act was considered insane not only by men but also by women. The grandfather blames his penis for not giving him a daughter. Moreover Maxine’s maternal grandfather from China was “an unusual man in that he valued girls; he taught all his daughters how to read and write” (CM,30). Thus surprisingly the immigrants follow the patriarchal rules more strictly than the people in China. May be it is their attempt to keep their culture intact and nostalgia for homeland.
When the father finds himself in a subjugated position he becomes silent. Silence is a state generally associated with women. If ever he broke the silence that was to utter curses against women, to give vent to his frustration. The narrator writes, “You were angry. You scared us. Everyday we listened to you swear, ‘Dog vomit, Your mother’s cunt, your mother’s smelly cunt’ … Obscenities. I made a wish that you only meant gypsies and not women in general” (CM, 12).

When Baba is harassed by gypsies and the police, he lets out his rage on the women of his family. But the narrator/daughter is still sympathetic. She understands the state of mind of the dominant majority. She knows that he feels emasculated, “We knew that it was to feed us you had to endure demons and physical labor. You screamed wordless male screams that jolted the house upright and staring in the middle of the night” (CM, 13).

Baba is silent because he has been deceived by his friends and lost his work. It is a silence of resignation. He stopped talking thus punishing the women with a silence, “You rendered us invisible, gone …. You kept up a silence for weeks and months …. You say with a few words and the silences: No stories. No past. No China” (CM, 14).

Of course, it is true that the father does not mean what he says. He does not mean to abuse the women of his family. He is angry over the fact that he has been reduced to an inferior position, he has been degraded and considered a non-being, condition prescribed for women in the traditional Chinese society. He feels that he has been degraded to the level of women. He marks all his clothes with the word “center” (CM, 15). This expresses his wish to acquire a central position in the traditional patriarchal society, a place which he thinks he has lost.
While the daughter/narrator tries to sympathise with her father, she also attains a victory over him. Although he denies her an identity, she imagines “his-story” thus giving an identity. The father will never tell his story and he remains the creation of his daughter. Like all other immigrants the father has to make use of clever and subversive strategies in order to survive. They want to display their valor, heroism but America does not give them any chance. On the Angel Island, the father along with other men, understands this quite well. They came to know that they “had come to a part of the world not made for honor where a hero cannot use his bravery” (CM, 55). Thus they have to adopt “the skill of … deceits” (CM,60) usually associated with women. Thus the female strategies prove to be more practical and long-lasting.

Kingston places three chapters “The Great Grandfather of the Sandalwood Mountains,” “On Mortality” and “On Mortality Again” together. In “The Great Grandfather of the Sandalwood Mountains” the plantation workers are sickened unto death because of the rule of silence. The women were not allowed to immigrate, so the men have to live in women-less societies. Kingston is sympathetic towards her ancestors. Bak Goong grumbles, “If I knew I had to take a vow of silence … I would have shaved off my hair and become a monk. Apparently we’ve taken a vow of chastity too. Nothing but roosters in this flock” (CM,100). Although imagined, Bak Goong’s story is quite realistic, and all this imagination by a woman! So when Bak Goong was silenced he feels suffocated. He rebels first by singing but he is

---

punished for this. Thus he finds himself in a position that is traditionally feminine. Then he began to cough, “The deep, long, loud coughs, barking and wheezing, were almost as satisfying as shouting... He did not even mind the despair, which dispelled upon his speaking it” (CM,104).

The China Men longed for home. They felt homesick and to heal it they dig up a hole and have a shout party. They shout out their longings, fears, frustrations etc. in it. “They had dug an ear into the world, and were telling the earth their secrets” (CM,117). The main thing they desire for is “Home. Home. Home.” (CM,117). Thus the men are incomplete without women, care, love and affection of home, country and culture. Ah Goong, the railway grandfather “felt his heart breaking of loneliness at so much blue-blank space between star and star. The railroad he was building would not lead him to his family” (CM,129). He compares his loss to the myth of Altair and Vega, the Spinning Girl and the Cowboy, destined to meet only once a year.

In Tu’s story we encounter a man who has to undergo all the pains that women might feel. Tu Tzu-chun could be immortal if he remained silent in various illusions. He is told that those illusions could be quite threatening, one being born as a woman. “He heard gods and goddesses talking about him, ‘This man is too wicked to be reborn a man. Let him be born a woman’” (CM,121). This is his illusion. Then he is born as a deaf-mute female named Tu. She is considered ideal as she is considered voiceless. When she grew up she was married to a man called Lu. At first he is happy and does not mind. He said, “Why does she need to talk, said Lu, to be a good wife? Let her set an example for women”(CM,121). The men like Tang Ao and Bak
Goong, who have undergone such hardships knew that silence is no less painful and it is equally essential for both the sexes to talk. Further in this story, Tu now a mother, is not able to tolerate the torture on her child and screams. Thus the loss of immortality. The Chinese fable thus confirms women as weaker than men. But Kingston is of the view that maternal love is above immortality.

Thus we see that in order to restore their sense of masculinity the Chinese men vent their anger on the more powerless - the women and children. Themselves invisible they try to render others invisible. A. Freeman is of the view that the violence within the family is a product of frustration, stemming from factors such as an individual’s lack of goal fulfillment, unemployment, poverty, or cultural deprivation.72

Thus in China Men Kingston very successfully uses feminist strategies to show the oppression of the Chinese-American male. She tells the stories of those men who have traditionally undervalued the women.

In the writing of her next book Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book Kingston was influenced by Virginia Woolf’s Orlando and William Carlos Williams’ In the American Grain. The main character of Orlando is a mental and physical transsexual. Kingston comments, “Virginia Woolf broke through constraints of time, of gender, of culture.” On the other side Williams helped her to break the rigid gender and racial boundaries, “I find that so freeing, that I don’t have to be constrained to being Just one ethnic group or one gender.”73

In Williams’ imagination Abraham Lincoln is the mother of the country, a woman with a great bearded face and in a shawl walking through the battle-fields. Kingston notes, “I can now write as a man, I can write as a black person, as a white person; I don’t have to be restricted by time and physicality.”74 Her first two books are sharply divided on gender lines but this book constantly crosses the gender borders. *Tripmaster Monkey* destabilizes “static binary oppositions such as male/female, ethnicity/gender, and racism/sexism through a constant shifting of positions and a radical theorization of gender as both a ‘product’ and a ‘process’.”75 This novel deconstructs the social construction of gender on two levels - on the thematic level we have the feminized man and the masculine woman and on the narrative level we have the female author and the narrator and the male character.

Kingston wants to transcend the sharply divided gender boundaries, “I am trying to think whether we can make any generalizations about men and women. I have thought about the animus and the anima, Jung’s terms, as I work. I have had dreams about two women, and they both have a left toe on all four feet. Somehow; if I could get to the point where one is a man and one is a woman, I’d be more balanced person. Somewhere, in the writing of the two books, things did sort out: there was a man and a woman.”76

*Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book* is a kind of reply to her critics. In this novel she has made Frank Chin, her arch enemy, her protagonist. Chin is a major inspiration for Wittman Ah Sing. Apart from Chin we are reminded of some of his characters like Tam Lum

---

74 Fishkin 784.
76 Rabinowitz 180.
from ‘The Chickencoop Chinaman’ and Fred Eng from ‘The Year of the Dragon.’ Chin described her works as fake and this word forms the heading of the novel. In this book Kingston stresses on “multilayered thinking” instead of concentration on binary oppositions. Thus she presents us with a post-gender and post-ethnic book. She is not bothered about specific ethnic or gender issues.

In *Tripmaster Monkey* we are introduced to an anti-racist but sexist male protagonist who is deftly manipulated by the female narrator. Kingston decided to have a male protagonist and gives him all the wild, inventive sixties language, since women did not have such excitingly dramatic lives in that period. In the sixties the sexual and social roles were changing and getting redefined. The basic question of what made the man American or American-manly vexed many young Asian-Americans. Although he is obnoxious, Kingston confesses that Wittman is the man that she would have been if she were a young man in the ‘60s.

The protagonist is arrogant, reactive, antiracist but sexist, full of self-mockery. He wants to wear green because this makes the Chinese complexion look more yellow. He loses his job because he displays Barbie dolls and toy monkeys in obscene poses in the toy department. While sitting in a restaurant he hears the punch-line “Every Mexican in town has one” (TM, 214) and feels insulted. This paranoia makes him stand against the racist joke. He does not have the physical strength, associated with traditional masculine qualities, nor does he have the economic power. Thus he is in the constant fear of being dubbed as

---

77 Hsia-hung 22.
effeminate, a usual stereotype attached with the Chinese-Americans. While he was in the high school he was denied the main lead: “I did my bearded Americans, Walt Whitman and John Muir, guys with a lot of facial hair to cover up my face and my race” (TM, 26). He is doubly marginalized by the girls of his clan. He grumbles, “Women have all the good lines. I almost turned in to a Mei Lan Fan androgyne doing those lines single-handed. I am ruined for ensemble work. I haven’t been on the stage since” (TM, 26).

Similarly at the end of the novel, after his performance, he gets a banana from Lance, his Japanese-American friend. He elaborates, “…this banana suggest two parts of the anatomy that are deficient in Orientals. The nose and the penis. Do you think if I attached it between my eyes I’d get to be a movie star? Do you think if I attach it between my legs, I’d get the girls” (TM, 316). He is tortured by the majority group. He blurts out, “They’re taking the ‘I’ away from us. ‘Me’- that’s the fucked over, the fuckee. ‘I’- that’s the mean-ass motherfucker first-person pronoun of the active voice, and they don’t want us to have it” (TM, 318). He hates the mass media for perpetuating such notions. He wants “to punch Charlie Chan too in his pregnant stomach that bellies out his white linen maternity suit” (TM, 320). Charlie Chan is a famous detective who is too good and clean for sex and who has developed “a widow’s hump from bowing with humbleness” (TM, 320). He is described as “The Good Mensch” who “runs all over Setzuan in a dress then in pants, and fools everybody” because Chinese look so alike, we ourselves can’t tell the difference between a man and a woman. We’re de-balled and other-worldly, we don’t have the natural fucking urges of the average, that is the white human being” (TM, 320).
Thus, like every other Chinese-American, he hates being called effeminate, or having feminine qualities. He tries to protect his manhood from all sorts of dangers. In this he goes further by pointing out that the movie ‘The Bitter Tea of General Yin’ is an attempt to castrate the Chinese-American manhood. “They named him that to castrate us. General Yin instead of General Yang, get it? Again the China man made into a woman” (TM, 322).

Wittman Ah Sing, when we meet him is in a bad financial condition, he is not employed. He is shamefully running away from the draft. Kingston presents us with a dilemma which the young men felt “yearning for glory while hiding from the draft” (TM, 139). Wittman wants all the glory, valor and the heroic achievements and adventures of the heroes without involving himself in the war.

He has a liberal arts education which proves useless for him. He suffers from sense of inferiority, social and racial, real and imaginary and that is the reason that his relation with the women are not good. He cannot propose to the girl of his dreams Nanci Lee, his fellow Cah graduate. He is afraid of making friends with a Japanese girl Yoshi! Ogasawara. Judy has a stereotypical thinking and he pretends to be a Japanese boy majoring in engineering and envisions her to be a blue bore.

His relationship with his newly wed bride is equally full of tension and anxiety. After his marriage to Taia he tells her the story of Liu Pei and Lady Sun from The Romance of the Three Kingdoms. He tells the story to make her more Chinese. He describes Lady Sun as “a beautiful princess with red hair and blue eyes” (TM,172), She sends Liu Pei a proposal of marriage. On their wedding day Liu is surprised to see his armor-clad bride, her amazons and her apartment all full of
spears and swords. The lady swordfenced with her husband, rides alongside and helps him single-handedly to run away to the north shore. Although Wittman’s purpose in telling this story to Taña is quite different but he is unaware of the fact that Taña is getting feminist ideas out of it. Taña compares herself to Lady Sun who protected her husband, similarly she had protected Wittman from the draft. The narrator describes Liu as “a man with the gift of tears” (TM,174) and Lady Sun as a woman fully armored, silver from head to toe” (TM,175). Thus the gender hierarchies are changed, an effeminate man, Wittman, and a masculine woman Taña.

Wittman is quite disturbed over his emotional and financial dependence over Taña. When Wittman challenges Taña to sword-fencing he is easily defeated. When Taña ignores his moodiness and goes on sleeping, he contemplates. “He sat on the foot board, his sword between his knees. In the shining steel handguard, his penis reflected huge. Behind it, his pinhead peeped out a long ways off. How odd, his head, the container of his mind, which contains the universe, is a complicated button topping this gigantic purple penis, which ends in a slit, like vagina” (TM, 221).

This reveals his uneasiness over male impotence. Wittman is frustrated at not being able to master the traditional phallic symbol, the sword. So he “go-ape” again. He jumps out from Taña’s closet as a killer ape who “screams louder and higher than the ladies” (TM, 221). He watches his profile in “milady’s dressing table” and Taña’s hand mirror (TM, 222). Later on he goes off to sleep besides Taña while comparing her to his mother. Since his masculinity is threatened he is over-defensive and always threatening to take a divorce if Taña looked down upon his relatives. Thus we are presented with a protagonist who
is insecure, unstable and a chauvinist. His fears are somewhat alleviated by enforcing a rigidly defined gender boundary.

Wittman is a pacifist and the novel does not close the hope for valorous action to pacifist males. Rather she resurrects such values in a pacifist frame. The narrator emphasizes on the shift from traditional realm of warfare to domestic, “How do unrelated people get together? They get married” (TM, 143). Lance says that the foreign policy should be “We want to marry you” (TM, 143). But this cannot be simply read as privileging the feminine over the masculine.

The narrator affirms that gender roles are fluid. She writes, “Unfortunately for peace on Earth, the listening ladies were appeased, and Lance had run out of plowshare ideas. Nanci and Taña and Sunny and Judy thought that if, they were allowed to play war women, they were liberated. The time of peace women, who will not roll bandages or serve coffee and doughnuts or rivet airplanes or man battleships or shoot guns at strangers, does not begin tonight” (TM, 148).

Tripmaster Monkey ends with a hymn to marriage. The audience comprising of Wittman’s community blessed him and his bride. He even gets a warm hug from Kwan Yin / Kingston as a tribute to his new found pacifism. In the end Wittman becomes a pacifist. What Kingston wants to say is that heroism is possible without following the heroic code blindly and without supporting violence.

Tripmaster Monkey is a book about Asian-American manhood, an affirmation of the community as well as a feminist text. The narrative voice is thoroughly feminine. She controls his consciousness, “I felt that as a narrator I took a rock and threw it on top of the
protagonist and captured him. And kept him in place.”⁷⁹ It is revolutionary since we generally have male omniscient narrator. She becomes “a female presence who chides, sympathizes with and mocks macho main character.”⁸⁰ She gives her protagonist an education in the ways of women by criticizing him for sexism. She is like “a narrating mother moving her boy around.”⁸¹

The monkey does not easily give up. He fights her back. “He picked Kwan Yin up from the mantelpiece, and shook her, shook himself as if she were doing it, bonked himself on the head with her, and disappeared, yanked, behind the chalk board” (TM,256). He refuse to accept reality. He has to learn to be one with the female principles of the world. The monkey vacillates between opposing viewpoints, presenting conflicts.

---

⁸⁰ Talbot 14.