CHAPTER - VI

RECONFIGURATIONS AND REENACTMENTS

*(Hawai‘i One Summer, To Be the Poet & The Fifth Book of Peace)*

Among the recent novels of Maxine Hong Kingston *Hawai‘i One Summer* (1988) has a strong attachment to the place of her birth. It is the celebration of a place where she worked as a teacher, raised her son and wrote her first fiction. The novel is considered as elegiac, pensive and nostalgic. It has celebrated the landscape and the culture almost on the lines of American holiday resort. It is a canvass of rural Pacific idyll. It has succeeded in articulating the matrix of place, community and belonging in Hawai‘i. It bears the testimony to another dimension of Kingston’s work. Hawai‘i is an extensive place of meditation and environment. The novel has become a representative of ecology and a study of Eco Feminism. It has also become a testimony for her work. As an extensive meditation upon place and environment, Kingston imbricates the politics of ecology and a form of ecological feminism.

The novel comprises of eleven prose pieces written during the months of summer in 1978 evoking the reminiscences of Chinese American author Jane Snow Wang and Deng Ming Dao, Chinese American popular figures. The *Hawai‘i One Summer* were written personally and were later published. The text influenced by three
separate historical movements. It is imbued with Kingston’s uncomfortable experience of Vietnam War and its geopolitical environmental effects. Kingston’s repeated meditations on the conditions of the war and the promotion of peace during 1970s speaks for her attempts to denounce material possessions and an attempt to lead a political conscious life. Diane Simmons in the epigraphal comment has observed that the University of Hawaii has published almost ten years later, after Kingston has achieved literary prominence.

At the centre of the collection, Kingston’s abiding admiration for Hawaiian people’s celebration of place, is found. In the culture of Hawaii, ‘Place’ stands for the celebration community and culture. Hawaiians have a sense of community and the tribe along with the strong consciousness of music and mythology. Contemporary critical theory considers ‘local’ as central in elucidating ethnic, marginalized or regionalized literatures. Kingston’s conception of place is related to understanding specific traditions of Hawaii. Miranda Joseph in ‘The Discourse of Global Localisation’ observes: ‘Local’, ‘regional’ have to do with place…but often metamorphoses into connoting social spaces that do not correlate with place-kinship, ethnicity, culture or community” (Cruz-Malave 96). Another critic Stephen Sumida in And the View From the Shore: Literary Traditions of Hawai’i (1991) says: “in Hawai’i Island
culture place is conceived as history” (xvi). Kingston expresses this usage with the particular concept of aina translated as ‘land-spirit-people’: “In Hawaiian language… there is a word aina. It is a common word, it is a part of the state motto that we respect the aina. A Simple English translation for it is ‘the land’ (Coming Home. 113). As with aina, the sense of local has a specific usage. Kingston explains: “‘local’ is another political word in Hawai’i… It is a fight against colonialism…when you’re colonized, it means that they take away your local stories, your local customs and local identity” (116). It is for this reason Kingston felt as an outsider for many years in the Island. In 1979, she has observed that it is a hard place to belong to. Eventually, it was through her son Joseph that she found a sense of belonging: “I don’t have Hawaiian blood, and I see that Joseph is a Hawaiian blood” (Karen Horton 13). In the Preface Kingston describes in detail her awareness of the acuteness of a politics of place within the islands.

Hawai’i One Summer encompasses heightened sensitivity to both land and environment. Among eleven pieces of the text, the five pieces depict the relationship of Kingston with the land and with the nature at the backdrop of familiar relationships. ‘Our First House’, ‘Chinaman’s Hat’ ‘A City Person Encountering Nature’ ‘Strange Sightings’ and ‘A Sea Worry’ are interspersed with the evocations of the places of significance.
Though it is not labeled, much of Kingston’s writing comes under Ecofeminism. Veteran Eco critic and Eco activity Ynestra King observes that her work Kingston’s work combines feminism, environmentalism, antiracism, animal rights, anti-imperialism and antimilitarism. Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva in *Ecofeminism* (1993) describing the emergence of Ecofeminism as a dire necessity observes: “Ecofeminism… grew out of various social movements-the feminist, peace and the ecology movements- in the late 1970s and early 1980s” (13). The work as a quintessential ecofeminist representation describes Kingston’s consciousness of the powerful presentation of nature and her shift from the neutral observer to the caring participant of natural phenomena. Describing human like behavior, she speaks more generally of the wonders of nature and refers to various encounters with natural phenomena. The descriptions and literary homages to nature in all its power and glory comes almost as a matching to William Blake’s poetry and Steven’s poetry. Her evocation and eulogistic celebration of nature, place and species brings in the juxtaposition supernatural and quasi mythical qualities. In addition to anthropomorphisation of nature, Kingston’s relationship with nature reinscribes ecofeminism.

The ninth essay ‘Strange Sightings’ further manifests Kingston’s fascination with place, nature and landscape. She explores different dimensions of spirituality and mythology and probes into Kingston’s
fascination with place, nature and landscape. Hawaiian Islands landscape is known for inhabitation of spirits and propagation of mythical elements. Literally addressing Hawaiian as supernatural, Kingston describes her own experience of seeing spirits: “I saw a whirling witch in the intersection by our house. She had one red cheek and one black cheek. Surrounded by a screaming pointing cloud, she turned and turned on her broom” (54). These descriptions stand as hall marks of Eco Feminist literature and its willingness to explore different dimensions of spirituality and mythology.

The intense scrutiny of Kingston’s work probes the debate on belonging, ownership, exclusion and literary production. Kingston was vehemently criticized by the Chinese American writer Frank Chin on the reason that Kingston has failed terribly to pay homage to the Indigenous tradition of Chinese America. To salvage herself from the criticism, in Hawai‘i One Summer, Kingston justifies ‘ethnic ethics’ of literary production. She bends literary modes and mythical understandings in this work. She avoids all kinds of controversies through her authorial freedom. She has achieved a distinctive hallmark of her writing with mixed genre and episodic style. Kingston lived in Hawai‘i between 1967 and 1984. Majority of essays in this collection were written co-terminously with China Men published in 1980. As a historiographic
metafiction, *China Men* has been evaluated as slightly accomplished version of the life story presented in *The Woman Warrior*. It is from the juxtaposition of *China Men* and *Hawai’i One Summer*, Kingston develops a complex narration braiding place, history and ancestry. The second section of *China Men* entitled ‘The Great Grandfather of the Sandalwood Mountains’ relates the history of Kingston’s great-grandfather. Kingston imaginatively reconstructs her grandfather’s life in Hawai’i giving the evidence of juxtaposition in *China Men*. The way Kingston describes the striking similarities synchronizes the nature with Eco feminist perspectives. She establishes atavistic connection to her male ancestors striking intimacy with places and spaces in *Hawai’i One Summer*.

*To Be the Poet* (2002) is Kingston’s long book. In almost poetic rapture she observes: “Let my life as a poet begin… I have labored for over twelve years, one thousand pages of prose. Now I want the easiness of poetry… I won’t be workhorse anymore; I’ll be a Skylark” (1). The work is based on the lectures delivered by Kingston at Harvard University in 2000 on the history of American civilization. Considering the labour involved in recreating her works, Kingston wanted to reflect upon her achievements and aspirations as a writer, specially during the period of the publication of this novel. Writing *To Be the Poet* acted as interregnum to her. She indulges in extensive reflection on the status of
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poetry and the process of poetic creation. Her contemplation includes the politics of form and discipline required to write, teaching and sharing of poetry. She has also deeply reflected on the theories of poetry. Apart from this, Kingston has mused at some length upon the process and practice of writing. Apart from the subject of poetry, To Be the Poet presents the collection of her philosophy of life and includes her understanding of pacifist and eco feminist politics of contemporary times. Her attitude in understanding the ageing of her life, experience of mothering are the recurrent preoccupations of the content of the Book. The book is divided into three sections: “I Choose the Poet’s life’, ‘I Call on the Muses of Poetry, and Here is What I get’, and ‘Spring Harvest’. Kingston’s optimistic and enthusiastic view of life is presented in the first section. It shows her anxiety in initiating the new phase of life. The second section presents the whimsical and more humorous attitude towards life that lies in dismantling the process of writing. The final section presents in the interweaving of the reflections of prose and poetry. On the whole, the book offers a fascinating glimpse into the life of Kingston and becomes a manifesto of Kingston’s praxis as a pacifist artist.

Kingston’s Fifth Book of Peace (2003), echoes her clarion call for peace. The end of the novel echoes her conviction for peaceful world: “Children, everybody, here’s what to do during war: In a time of
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destruction, create something. A poem. A parade. A community. A school. A vow. A Moral principle. One peaceful moment” (402). It is Kingston’s fourth major publication and a sequel to The Woman Warrior, China Men and Tripmaster Monkey. She explained that it is a book of endings that forms the omissions of three previous works. It is partly a fiction and nonfiction with the characters and narrators from her previous fiction and memoirs. With the perfect synthesis of fiction and nonfiction, it is like sandwich. The Fifth Book of Peace has five chapters: ‘Fire’, ‘Paper’, ‘Water’, ‘Earth’ and the ‘Epilogue’. The first chapter ‘Fire’ is about the San Francisco big fire in 1991 and her father’s funeral ceremony. She loses her house and important belongings including her book manuscript in the fire. She also imagines Iraq war during the fire. In the second chapter Kingston explains her search for ‘Books of Peace’ or ‘Three Lost Books of Peace’. The next chapter ‘Water’ is fiction, Wittman Ah Sing, a Chinese American Playwright and poet and Tana, a white woman artist go to Hawaii during the Vietnam War to pursue peace. In the other chapter ‘Earth’, Kingston explains her writing workshop and her visit to Plum village. Kingston meets, talks and listens to various people who have participated in Vietnam war.

Kingston begins Fifth Book of Peace with the statement: “If a woman is going to write a Book of Peace, it is given her to know
devastation” (3). Unlike her earlier works, this book has received cool perception. One of the reasons is that the critics and reviewers are ignorant of the strategies in elucidating the heterogeneous and weird text that defies easy categorization. In order to explore the possible resolutions, Polly Shulman’s essay in New York Times Book Review becomes the best example. To Polly Shulman The Fifth Book of Peace is a strange, sacred thing pieced together with fragments. She is of the view that the characters are unreal and disappointing; stories are too moralistic and the Utopianism is unreal, excessive and forced. Shulman in the essay concludes:

To me, this need for happy endings seems anything but peaceful. It’s as if Kingston was hit so hard- by the fire? The war? The loss of her partens…?-that she can’t face anymore pain…this book has done its work of moving her past the need to sanitize and happify. (New York Times Book Review, 28.2003)

This is also due to the reason that Kingston turns and observes to write about her life directly, without confining to formal, artistic, linguistic requirements and meticulous fictional techniques. Moreover, Kingston recreates her novel lost in the fire and places it alongside three memoir-like chapters. It is due to these aspects, The Fifth Book of Peace becomes
the most complicated, autobiographical and self reflexive work. Kingston ostensibly supplements the historical narratives with metacommentary and fiction but leaves the text that posits neither the fantasy of an authoritative master narrative nor the fascinating information. Despite, such reception, it is pertinent to observe that the book engages universal issues such as war and peace, trauma and therapy and contain various transnational elements.

A complete understanding of The Fifth Book of Peace is possible only when we place it in the context of Kingston’s writing career and life trajectory. Fighting against racism in the mainstream American society and sexism in Chinese traditional patriarchal society, Kingston devoted herself to writing a sequel to Tripmaster Monkey. The fire accident that destroyed the property and the manuscript of the novel makes her to begin the chapter with ‘Fire’ that describes the devastating effect of the incident that killed twenty five and left thousands of people homeless. The other chapter ‘Paper’ depicts her alleged three lost books of Peace in China, Hong Kong and Taiwan. The chapter ‘water’ is a recreation of her burned fiction about Wittman Ah Sing and his family Hawai’i. The final chapter ‘earth’ records her efforts to reestablish herself by calling upon ‘war veterans to help write a literature of peace’. The titles of the chapters remind us of the four elements in Buddhist cosmology (earth, water, fire
and wind) and also the five elements in Chinese cosmology: metal, wood, water, fire and earth. Each chapter is loosely connected with others and in the context of Kingston’s creative career, a common content that emerges as the subject of narration is peace. Despite the connotation of the title of the book ‘peace’ (he-ping in Chinese), Peace has been one of the major concerns of Kingston’s life.

_The Fifth Book of Peace_ further confirms Helena Grice’s judgment that “Each of her books has taken pacifism as its theme, to a greater or lesser degree”. It is her consistently politicized worldview and commitment to pacifism in all its forms, which constitute a personal and writers credo. King Kok Cheung in the essay: “The Woman Warrior versus The Chinaman Pacific: Must a Chinese American critic Choose between Feminism and Heroism?”, more than fifteen years ago has expressed the similar opinion: “Kingston’s commitment to pacifism—through re-visioning and re-contextualizing ancient ‘heroic’ material is even more evident in her most recent book _Tripmaster Monkey_ (Conflicts in Feminism, ed. Marianne Hirsh and Evelyn Fox Keller.1990. 243). The views expressed by these critics are supported by Kingston in many of her interviews. If one examines author’s retrospective interviews, they indicate the Kingston’s intention ‘to make the world a more peaceful place’ and ‘to change the world through artistic pacifist means’.
The fire accident is terribly a traumatic experience to Kingston. It is like a fire sacrifice that made the fictional and non-fictional recreation and three memoir like chapters complement each other and make the author to represent in fictional and nonfictional ways. Although the reason for fire accident is as normal as timely rain and the five years of draught, this fails to be rational and scientific explanation in relation to Kingston’s father’s death. It is through the death of her father and fire accident, Kingston learns the typical Chinese lesson of interdependence of fortune and misfortune. Significantly, this fire accident facilitates Kingston’s transformation as a writer and as a human being. It is from this perspective, the very beginning of the novel offers the intimate knowledge of devastation and produces peace. Her observation that ideas kept pouring into me: “I know why this fire. God is showing us Iraq. It is wrong to kill, and refuse to look at what we’ve done” (14). This complete devastation gave her fresh perspectives of lives. It has strengthened her knowledge and empathy and related her to fellow sufferers of the world, especially those suffering from the world.

Kingston writes for the world and on behalf of the world. The influence of Buddhism and its ideals is almost obvious in the thematic concerns of the book. The Buddhist term ‘Sangha’ appears many times in the book and the word ‘community’ is used in secular sense. Liberating
herself from the solitary confinement of writing, she writes for the community and realizes the importance of representing the community. In her interview with Maggie Ann Bowers Kingston relates her to the community and says: “I am thinking we can make a peaceful world-how can we change the world? First there has to be the idea of peace and community and love” (Writing Across Worlds: Contemporary Writers Talk. Ed. Susheila Nasta. 2004.175). This perception finds resonance in her another interview to Shelley Fisher Fishkin:

My idea was that we can turn weapons into musical instruments. It’s sort of like plowshares from swords and again. I’m saying that the first step is to have that king of consciousness that can create the world and save it. We have to change human consciousness and that’s a step towards changing the material world. (Conversations 160)

These views specify that Kingston combines her writing expertise with the Buddhist mindfulness expounded by Thich Nhat Hanh in order to establish and lead her Sangh.

Kingston combines writing and spiritual practice and adopts Thich Nhat Hanh’s idea and practice of Buddhist mindfulness to help the participants face and write about their own traumas. In her approach to the practices of Buddhism, Kingston has targeted the veterans of Vietnam
War, Korean War, Second World War and the Iraqi War, with her persuasive ideas and effective methods. Helena Grice says that Kingston’s religious interest in Buddhism is central to *The Fifth Book of Peace*, although it can actually be traced back to her early writing years. In one of the workshops conducted Kingston explains the purpose: “You have lived, witnessed, and suffered terrible events, wars” (259). The chapter on ‘Earth’ which occupies about two-fifths of the *The Fifth Book of Peace*, meticulously chronicles how Kingston witnessed the growth as the author and the traumatic world of the sufferers. This makes us understand that the *Book of Peace* is no longer private solitary creation but a collective work of writing life peace and hope. Though the book is compared with John Mullign’s *Shopping Cart Soldiers* (1997), James Janko’s *Buffalo Boy* and *Geronimo* (2006), and *Veterans of War, Veterans of Peace* (2006), it is fiercest and deepest story bravely told by Kingston in the most powerful and transformative form of writing.

The concept of ‘narrative reenactment’ and the ‘reconfiguration of the American pacific’ are viewed from the point of view of peace activism in Kingston’s *The Fifth Book of Peace*. Kingston is concerned with the memory works methods and critically remembers and represents the history of twentieth century US wars in Asia. Such memory work has been a strong component of Asian American literature. Marita Sturken in
Tangled Memories: The Vietnam War, the AIDS Epidemic, and the Politics of Remembering (1997) understands memory as: ‘a narrative rather than a replica of an experience that can be retrieved and relived’ (24). It is argued that public memory most often takes the form of cultural reenactment and retells the past in order to create narratives of closures. In psychoanalytic sense, memory is restricted to literal repetition or reenactment of the original traumatic experiences. Kingston’s The Fifth Book of Peace reconceptualises the enactment of oriented narratives of Asian American wars. The American Pacific, as both geo-political and symbolic terrain is a primary site and subject of The Fifth Book of Peace. Wittman’s chapter in suggests that Kingston sought a more comprehensive retelling of her own relocation to Hawai’i. All the episodes narrated in Hawai’i one Summer are recycled in Wittman’s narrative. Playwright Wittman Ah sing is conceived as a complex amalgam of four figures: American poet Walt Whitman, the monkey hero of the Chinese Classic The Journey to the West (called Saiyuuki in Japan), a stereotyped character named “Ah Sin” in a story by American writer Bret Harte, and Asian American writer Frank Chin, who was the most vocal and famous critic of The Woman Warrior. In Tripmaster Monkey, Wittman’s play is about a particular war and the nature of war itself. He battles the social and political systems that deny his full existence as a human being. In Fifth Book of Peace Wittman’s narrative
also culminates in a communal play and is conceived as a pacifist enterprise. Kingston’s new deployment of Walt Whitman is only to provide a vision and method for articulating a creative writing partner to reenact her own memory. Walt Whitman worked on one volume of poems his entire life, editing and adding to it through several versions in 1855 and in 1891-2. *Leaves of Grass* spans half century of US history which included the building of transcontinental railroad, the Civil war and America’s transition from an agrarian to an industrialized society. Despite his philosophical and stylistic excesses, his image as America’s national bard remains intact and his influence on the evolution of poetry is profound. Though Emily Dickinson is also a quintessential poet of excess, the socio cultural circumstances of her life and the nature of her psyche and genius channeled that excess into a minimal and reclusive style. Kingston is influenced by Whitman’s commitment to a pacifist livelihood because it makes democracy and community inseparable. Kingston has enhanced his whitmanian vision and method with cultural knowledge she herself did not have as a new comer to the islands in the late sixties. She depicts through Wittman’s dialogue with four heterogeneous historical figures- James Jones, Haunani-kay/ Mililani Trask, Gauguin and Lew Welch. These characters serve as touch tones for Wittman’s political and cultural consciousness. But Kingston fails in making these characters to envision ‘American Pacific’. It is obvious that
the ‘Song of Myself’ created by Whitman seeks to embrace all individual embodiments of animate and existence within a vision of harmonious coexistence. Whitman’s chapter in *The Fifth Book of Peace* as it is in Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass* is a rhetorical correlative for a democratic community.

Whitman’s reappearance in *The Fifth Book of Peace* indicates that Kingston has gone beyond Walt Whitman’s representation of democratic community. Kingston draws the implications of his representation of death for the relationship of community to pacifism. Thematically the aspects of *Leaves of Grass* emphasized in *The Fifth Book of Peace* are the representations of war. Kingston draws out the pacific implications of Whitman’s attentiveness to civil war veterans and his insistence on viewing death in relation to life. So, the Wittman who reappears in The Fifth Book of Peace is endowed with Whitman’s method of observing, naming and embracing everyone and everything. Kingston presented this as articulation of community as a form of promoting peace. *The Fifth Book of Peace* defines community as a manifestation and medium of pacifism. At a very basic level, being with others or connecting oneself to others, is defined as life affirming gesture considered as a foundational to peace. Its antithesis, disconnection and exclusion is the foundation of warfare.
Community is vital to memory work that seeks to alleviate grief or redress grievances in Kingston’s narration. Bearing witness and remembering productive negotiations of suffering and death are part of Kingston’s structural narrations. The dedication for *Fifth Book of Peace* – ‘to Veterans of War, Veterans of Peace’ – justifies this perspective and conveys its association with linguistic parallels. These parallels inscribe the possible collaborative memory work. This turns antagonistic relationship as reciprocal. It also paves the way for destructive binaries transformed into life generating circles of energy. Kingston has called upon the mutual assistance to enable veterans of peace to bear witness for soldiers and veterans of war. *The Fifth Book of Peace* indicates the intensity of the Viet Nam memory that Kingston sought to express. The intensity and weight of the memory looms large in *Hawai‘i One Summer*, *To Be the Poet* and *The Fifth Book of Peace*. The very objective creating Wittman Ah Sing is the meticulous strategy of Kingston for bringing the memory of Vietnam War into narrative reenactment. It is through these characters that Kingston can speak and listen to herself. She probes into the forgotten past and indulges in retrieving glorious and inglorious past of the colonized and immigrant experiences. Consolidating Wittman’s groundbreaking perspective of the growth of dead through natural elements of nature, Kingston’s *Hawai‘i One Summer*, *To Be the Poet* and *The Fifth Book of Peace* presents the model for reconfiguring and
reenacting peace activism based on collaborative writing with objective of imagining, performing and teaching memory work.

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