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Crisis of Genre and Diasporic Identity in Maxine Hong Kingston's The Woman Warrior

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ABSTRACT

Maxine Hong Kingston makes a conscious choice of presenting a multi-generic narrative in her autobiography, *The Woman Warrior* (1975) as a method of structural navigation which describes her experiences and struggles while growing up as a Chinese-American girl in California. As a diasporic text this choice of stretching the sacred conventions of autobiographical genre subjects it to scrutiny which primarily focuses on the text's impact rather than search for meaning for the protagonist. The dispute among critics essentially considers the novel as fiction clumsily disguised as autobiography. This paper argues that the incorporation of talk stories, memory, fact, fiction along with elements of Chinese and American culture enables Kingston to truthfully comprehend a disoriented past where stories of the 'other' coexist and help in reconstructing a unique personal self. The deconstruction of generic boundaries in the text become tools for questioning the public-private binary associated with history and autobiography respectively. However, this blurring of distinctions between fiction and non-fiction in the novel is brought about not by ignoring norms of genre but by actively evaluating and engaging with it. An objective retelling of Kingston's story then relies on multiple subjective experiences and fictious accounts which enable her to situate herself within her family and community and to understand the complexities of Asian-American identity.

Keywords: Multiplicity of genre, Identity-crisis, Diaspora, Disoriented self

Introduction

Maxine Hong Kingston emerged as one of the prolific writers of 20th century American literature with her texts like *China Men* or *The Woman Warrior* where she actively interrogates the roots of her unique inter-sectional position and contradictions in terms of identity. As an Asian-American writer she revises the form of the memoir to reconcile with opposing and contesting socio-political values that grapple her mind. Kingston states that a linear rendition of life events is difficult as the conventional boundaries restrict to some extent, the vast complexity of stereotypes and expectations attached to her ethnicity of an almost unknown Chinese past and concrete American present. In an interview, Kingston expresses this dilemma and provides reasons for her mature albeit unique approach:

> "I think that in every one of my books I had to create a new way of telling what I had to say. And I feel that I break through pigeonholes of what's fiction and what's nonfiction, of what an autobiography is. My next thou ght is trying to figure out a way to integrate fiction and nonfiction." (qtd. in Fishkin 791)

The novel can be termed as a bildungsroman where the childhood of a young girl in a Chinese community is explored with an inclusion of personal histories and grim experiences of other women who also become a part of the author's 'I'. In the narrative structure the author locates herself within this long line of women who are real, mythical, strong, weak, timid, slave, warrior, old or young. In each of the five sections of the narrative, Kingston conjures up women characters including her mother to show how interdependent both past and present are.

Genre and Identity

Maxin Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* classifies it as 'Memoirs of a Girlhood among Ghosts' where multiple selves are coalesced together with the narrative moving from one story to the other without any connection between the two. The title of the book classifies it as a memoir, as a non-fiction narrative where personal reflection and quest for identity is set against a cultural and historical landscape. Through a combination of anger, critique and art, Kingston expresses the spectral melancholia of immigrants to explain her reliance on other narratives for constructing a narrative of her own. The tradition of imposing silence on the diasporic experience is confronted, laid bare and criticized through this unique narrative structure. By including stories of her mother, Brave Orchid and aunt Moon Orchid along with the fictitious tale of Fa Mu Lan, Kingston attempts to challenge the stringent standardization of culture and its effect on one's identity.

In "No Name Woman", Kingston discloses the story of her aunt who has been expelled from their family history as well as memory for committing adultery and giving birth to an illegitimate child. This chapter pictures dual perspectives of a cautionary tale as told by her mother and as a deliberate attempt to destroy this norm and give her aunt that denied conscience and space. In the very first lines of the book her mother mentions, "You must not tell anyone, what I am about to tell you" (Kingston, 3) to emphasize the consequences of misconduct and of defying their unsaid stringent codes. The narrator realizes that her community's forgetfulness was the real punishment rather than the violence meted out on her aunt. In this realization, the underlying fear of not conforming to these behavioral codes become evident. This substantiates the larger idea of Kingston facing uncertainties in her construction of self. This contrasts with her mother's talk-story in the chapter of "White Tiger" which involves a story of the woman warrior Fa Mu Lan. As a first-person narrative, the narrator imagines herself as the brave warrior who leads troops in battle. This identification with the woman warrior reveals the narrator's will to engage in a verbal battle just like Fa Mu Lan with words as her weapons extending to Kingston's effort in dealing with the ghosts encountered in her Chinese-American ethnicity. This chapter exemplifies Kingston's artistic proclivity to blend history and fiction as well as imagination and reality. Both narratives of "No Name Woman" and "White Tiger" denote a contrasting binary of a victim and hero.

These two accounts along with Brave Orchid's exploration of past in "Shaman" indicate the dominance of her influence to a certain extent. The narrator places her mother at the forefront of the varied stories which creates an illusion of her occupying the action of the novel. It can be argued that the narrator's understanding and exploration of China and its stories is somewhat painted with her mother's judgement. She feels alienated in America and this agitation makes her reduce everything American into "ghosts" and the language as 'ghost' language. While the cautionary tale in the first chapter dictates socio-behavioral norms, a prime part of the text stress on her experiences and reaction to circumstance.

Adding to this viewpoint, critic Bobby Fong states that, “Until the last chapter, the narrator remains in the background; her mother’s generation dominates the action. The experiences, in the main, are not those of Kingston but of her forbears, both lineal, in the case of her mother and aunt, and cultural, in the case of Fa Mu Lan, the warrior woman or Ts’ai Yen, the poetess.”

Early theorists of autobiography display an affinity towards linearity, a coherent shaping of the past to make unity of the experiences towards the end. It stresses on the idea of an unmediated truth that ensures the author to be its sole authority. The memoir simultaneously abides and evades this theoretical notion. According to Roy Pascal, “autobiographies offer an unparalleled insight into the mode of consciousness of other men”. If the men mentioned here is assumed to mean the author of the autobiography, then *The Woman Warrior* classifies as a text that represents a form of double consciousness. Hsiu Chuan Lee categorizes this as a process of “genre-crossing” where genre is dependent on how it is used in a text rather than being a blueprint for the text itself. She states that “the genre of a text is determined at the moment when it is appropriated by a reader into a specific "use," or, when it is cast into a specific interpretation (Lee, 88)”.

In *The Woman Warrior*, the quest of personal identity allows Kingston to put authenticity of the plot at stake. Kingston blends and blurs the firm boundaries of genre to place her own narrative on an entire choir of voices. It can be exemplified in the fourth chapter, “At the Western Palace” where the structure molds into a third person narrative to give an account of Moon Orchid who is unable to adjust in the alien like place after emigration. She is rooted in tradition and sticks to her socially expected gender role, finding liberation in silence. Her husband emigrates to America while she waits for years in her homeland with no sign of joining him. Brave Orchid becomes a kind of salvation for her who tries to break the glass of vulnerability and silence, lending her a voice. She arranges for her sister to come to America to face the reality and claim her position as the rightful wife. She becomes extremely engrossed in the act of confrontation between Moon Orchid and her husband by imagining alternate scenarios and events of the same. However, these efforts fail to reach its desired conclusion. Moon Orchid finds herself incompatible with the modern American city life where her own identity comes at stake. Her husband has transformed into a ‘ghost’ who stresses on her irrelevance. He states, “It’s a mistake for you to come here. You can’t belong. You don’t have the hardness of this country” (180). This pushes Moon Orchid to a tragic fate which mirrors that of the No Name Woman.

In the text, chapters three and four create contrasting personalities in terms of Brave Orchid and Moon Orchid. In her discussion of the book, Cynthia Wong further adds to this notion and states, “Moon Orchid's very name evokes beauty, evanescence, softness, femininity, poetry, the yin, in contrast to her sister's militant name, Brave Orchid. There is a dual contrast at play when Brave Orchid’s actions and responses are considered. She expresses her prejudices and hatred towards ‘ghosts’ and her reverence to unspoken social norms in one chapter while taking agency and fighting those traditions in another. This confuses Kingston who is unable to track the truthfulness in Brave Orchid’s character. The confusion faced by Kingston is somewhat resolved in the last chapter of the book, “A Song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe” through the process of rethinking and reconciliation. In this chapter, ‘I’ represents the autobiographer and novelist. The strained relationship with her mother forces her to lash out and express her anger and frustration. She presents the intricacies of trauma existing in silence. Brave Orchid’s act of

cutting her daughter's tongue as a way of helping her grasp every other language flop as the narrator loses her native tongue while also having difficulty making sense of the 'ghost' language. As an impressionable protagonist, she decides to alter her mother rather than questioning herself. The metaphor of knot that continued tightening itself as the narrative proceeded, starts to untangle in the last chapter where she mentions, "The beginning is hers, the ending mine" (245). In one of the dark episodes in the chapter, the narrator bullies a girl forcing her to Talk! Talk! Talk!'. This entire episode is based on the point of view of the bully where the girl becomes a metaphor for Kingston's own self transcending to the Chinese-American woman. She tries to break down the existing veil of stereotypes and silence by compelling the girl to obtain the power of speech which she never acquires. By further mentioning the legend of Ts'ai Yen, Kingston creates a point of similarity between her memoir and Ts'ai Yen's song to denote shared sensibilities and feeling of alienation.

The search of self through fragmented identities adds to the genre debate that questions the text's autobiographical integrity. It showcases a fictionalization of autobiography that disturbs the sacred boundaries of genres. Patricia Lin Blinde proposes a concise description which asserts that the text simultaneously renders itself as a "novel, an autobiography, a series of essays and poems". However, this technique is not bereft of criticism and denouncement. Frank Chin dismisses the book's claim of being an autobiographical narrative and challenges its literary "authenticity". He exclaims that it's a westernized narrative which does not represent the real world. The point on "realness" can be contested if the book is observed from a bilingual-bicultural perspective. Kingston discloses immigrant stories, secrets of diaspora reimagines "talk-stories" and experiences that shaped her life to achieve a communion through writing. This process involves appearance of fragmented memories and imagination to make sense of the untraversed path which is blurred just like memory itself. By choosing this form of language and storytelling, Kingstone manages to present reality in the most humane way possible where there is space for silence, imagination and reality. Realness is also vivid in terms of the author's unabashed writing of the struggles, vulnerabilities and violence of displacement, non-conforming gender roles, alienation, abandonment, anger and triumph. If taken to its logical extreme, this portrayal of violence brings in a component of truth bereft of any sugarcoating in her Asian-American narrative. She combines testimony with fantasy to present history from below.

Returning to the subject of genre, it can be argued that *The Woman Warrior* necessitates a joining of fact and fiction to describe specific experiences. By altering the genre of autobiography Kingston challenges the stringent standardization of culture and its effect on one's identity. She tries to constitute the stories in the retelling of it by compacting myth, history, fact and fiction as a collage. This becomes evident when she claims, "I continue to sort out what's just my childhood, just my imagination, just my family, just the village, just movies, just living." (244). Themes of alienation, madness, civilization, gender and identity politics force a destruction and reinvention of narrativity that fills the gaps and generates a coherent autobiographical subject. The thread of sacred generic conventions is presented and stretched at the same time. In a conglomeration of perspectives in five chapters, *The Woman Warrior* revisits and imagines specific experiences, provides descriptive visual imagery, combines fictive plus factual elements keeping it absent from hierarchical organization to exclusively insert themes that represent a true structure of Kingston's experience.

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