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## **Encountering the Gendered Transnational Identity: A Study of The Woman Warrior:Memoirs of a Girlhood among Ghosts**

**Dr.Milon Franz**

**Associate Professor**

**St. Xavier's College for Women, Aluva**

**Kerala, India, Pin: 683515**

**E mail:milonfranz@gmail.com**

**Abstract:**

The paper titled “Encountering the Gendered Transnational Identity through Memory Narratives: A Study of The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood among Ghosts” tries to make an analysis of Maxine Hong Kingston’s autobiographical fiction. It is being analyzed as a significant work that presents the dilemma of diasporic female identity. It critiques the patriarchal and ethnic discrimination the author encountered in her home land and in the foreign land. The paper delineates how she explores her individual and collective identity problematic through the excavation and rereading of her memories in China and America, reclaiming a feminist postcolonial voice. Assuming the mythical as well as real identity of a warrior, she is capable of combating the canons of transnational and patriarchal hegemony. The work is posited as a rare literary genre in which memory narratives as deployed as a screen to project her identity as a second- generation Chinese diasporic woman as well as to reread the national memories of the United States. The paper analyses in detail how the five chapters presented in the guise of talk-stories are subverted in order to present the social, psychological and cultural issues of the gendered diasporic identity.

**Key words: Diaspora, transnational identity, talk-story, immigrants, assimilation**

Maxine Hong Kingston's autobiographical work, *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of Girlhood among Ghosts* is a very daring and eloquent expression of the Chinese diasporic feminist identity. The work poignantly delineates the diasporic double displacement she experiences as a writer and as a woman. The memoir shows how historical situation involves construction of a new identity in the nation to which she has migrated and a complex relationship with the political and cultural history of the nation, she has left behind. She reveals in this work how gender, memory and identity are dialogically related, and how one's gender and ethnic identities may be affected by personal memory, familial memory and ethnic collective memory. She excavates her intimate cultural and familial memories and histories, and revises and retranslates them to understand her multiple identities and place in America. Kingston proves how remembrances practices and narratives can be used as strategic tools or methods to critique conventions of gender identities, roles and expectations. This autobiographical fiction, exquisitely connects memory with storytelling and voice and silence with oppression.

In this memoir, Kingston rewrites the collective memories of the Chinese diaspora and the official memories of the nation-state to reclaim a feminist postcolonial voice and space. Her writing reveals that women often act as transmitters of generational, counter-cultural, or collective memories through storytelling. She also suggests that women's memories, like the collective memories of the nation state and of the ethnic or diasporic community, are heterogeneous and hence can become sites of power struggle over truth which claims among women themselves, in this case, between the mother's version and the daughter's invention of the stories. Memory always enters into dialogue with the past by subjecting the past to a reflective awareness and by revealing the past's difference from the present. Memory also exists in relation to language, symbols, events, and social and cultural contexts.

In *The Woman Warrior*, Kingston deploys memory narratives as a screen to project her identity as a second-generation Chinese diasporic woman as well as rewriting and diversifying the national memories of the United States. Kingston complicates notions of identity construction as the narrator struggles to find meaning in the nuanced liminal spaces between

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gender and transnational identity. *The Woman Warrior* revolves around the development of an identity in which race and gender play central roles. As a daughter of immigrant diasporic parents, her cultural community was pushed to the margins of society, othered for their differences in language, customs and appearances. Diasporas construct racialized, gendered and oppositional identities, and diasporic consciousness involves a sense of loss and hope as a defining tension. Chinese diasporic feminist identity particularly refers to a feminist transnational identity that is critical of gender oppression both in China and in Chinese diaspora. The identity of second generation diasporic feminist subject becomes more sutured and difficult to construct and imagined, sliding between identification and misidentification.

Kingston can be credited for the introduction of the genre “talk-story” into ethnic literature in America. Talk-stories are linked to the local oral traditions of Hawai’i where Kingston lived in mid ’60s and ’70s. Wendy Ho explains that “talk-story” is a pidgin expression designating a “social or communal oral exchange in which people gather to ‘chew the fat’ or ‘shoot the breeze’ with friends and family” (28). In this memoir Kingston “retells traditional oral stories and/or invents subversive stories to account for the varying social, economic, cultural, and historical circumstances of Chinese women, families and communities in the United States” (28). Thus, this fictional autobiography becomes a mental re-presentation of an incoherent memory, an emotional misinterpretation of patriarchal type of legends by a woman – a feminist re-appropriation of these myths and legends, a cultural revising and an artistic distortion of Chinese sources. By re-telling these stories, through a process of disruption, mutation and reconstruction of culture, the author makes her past usable and understandable to the American contemporary existence and thus creates her Chinese American identity but also constructs a Chinese American literary tradition exposing the dangers of loss and erasure within the process of social transgression (Suci 3).

*The Woman Warrior* is a postcolonial collage of five short prose narratives that tell the coming of age story of a young second generation Chinese diasporic girl, who is unnamed but represents the author. Kingston explores how the self intersects with ethnic and gender identity within particular familial, cultural, and national geographies. The first narrative ‘No Name Woman’ tells

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the story of an unnamed aunt whose transgression of Chinese patriarchal traditions and sexual norms offers a political context for the narrator to challenge the unwritten rules of Chinese femininity she is expected to obey. The book begins with Maxine's mother warning her daughter of patriarchal punishment for any act of gender and sexual transgression. She says: "You must not tell anyone what I am about to tell you. In China your father had a sister who killed herself. She jumped into the family well. We say that your father has all brothers because it is as if she had never been born" (3). According to Maxine's mother, the villagers organized a midnight raid against the aunt's family, in violent revolt against the aunt's illegitimate pregnancy. That night the aunt gave birth to the baby in the pigsty, and the next morning Maxine's mother found her and the baby "plugging up the family well". The mother warned Maxine: "Don't let your father know that I told you. He denies her. Now that you have started to menstruate, what happened to her could happen to you. Don't humiliate us. You wouldn't like to be forgotten as if you had never been born. The villagers are watchful" (5).

Maxine inherits trans-generationally the traumatic post memory of her No Name Aunt through her mother's talk-story. This story is a testimony to the power of patriarchal erasure in history-the denial of women's sexuality and existence. If a woman transgresses conventional gender and sexual roles and norms, she is punished with the erasure of her name, body, subjectivity, history and descent from patrilineage. Moreover, Maxine's mother acts in contradiction; she retrieves the forgotten memory of the No Name Aunt, yet she also reinforces patriarchal silencing by warning the daughter to never repeat the story or act of female resistance to subjugation. Maxine learns that storytelling, such as her mother's didactic and morality stories, is influenced by invention, contradiction, motives, biases, and personal and familial memory. By telling the story of No Name Aunt, Kingston also points to the fact that wives of overseas Chinese migrants to America often remarry or have affairs, and this poses a threat to patriarchal families that strategically pursued male migration as a form of family's socioeconomic maintenance and advancement.

*The Woman Warrior* negotiates the tension, writing both memory as archaeological excavation and memory as continuous revision or retranslation. The former form of memory is about a return (whether physical, cultural or psychic), a return to one's cultural heritage or group, past, homeland, matrilineal archive of storytelling, ancestors and foremothers and personal or

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familial history to grapple with a “truth”. The latter is about the need to rewrite, revise and re-invent new versions of familial, diasporic, communal, and national memories to identify and hence construct a feminist second- generation Chinese diasporic identity. This tension exists in the story ‘No Name Woman’. Kingston is interested in finding out the “truth” about what happened to her aunt, and discovers that her mother’s truth claim of familial memory is but one version of many. Her mother’s story of No Name Aunt provides Kingston with a creative space to tell other possible or imaginary stories of a familial memory.

By telling the story of No Name Woman, Kingston is able to imagine her aunt as a woman with agency, whose suicide or death speaks of a silenced history within a family and of the gender inequality in China and in the Chinese diaspora. Kingston provides her aunt with subjectivity and some degree of subversion. In mourning her death, Kingston gives her aunt a second proper burial. Moving from a family talk-story to a well-known myth, Kingston then tells the narrative about the legendary swords woman Fa Mu Lan (Hua Mulan) in the chapter titled ‘White Tigers’. Within Chinese patrilineal patriarchal kinship, women are devalued as others. From the emigrant villagers and her parents, Maxine frequently hears the Chinese Confucian maxims that girls are parasites and deserters of their families: “Feeding girls is feeding cowbirds,” or “There is no profit in raising girls. Better to raise geese than girls” (46). The narrator recalls: “There is a Chinese word for the female I- which is ‘slave’. Break women with their own tongues’ (47). At one point, she laments: “Even now China wraps double binds around my feet” (48). Structural, relational, and symbolic patriarchy continues to pervade in China and in the Chinese diaspora. If Chinese masculinist social norms expect Maxine to “grow up a wife and a slave,” the chant of Fa Mu Lan , a gift from her mother, holds the “power to remind” the narrator that she would grow up to be “a warrior woman” (20). It is through women’s talk-stories that young girls, like Maxine, learn about sexism and the possibility of women’s resistance.

In reclaiming the myth or legend of Fa Mu Lan, an empowering warrior woman who vanquished an entire enemy army, Kingston provides an antidote to the submissive female. The figure of Fa Mu Lan also attests to the subversive act of “gender reversal” in her challenge of the oppressive gender system of both China and America. By cross- dressing as a man to join the army, Fa Mu Lan temporarily ceases to be a woman, transforming herself into a valuable fighter

to defend her family and community, as well as challenging the conventional gender scripts of China. Maxine identifies with Fa Mu Lan, for both females must transform themselves into literal or symbolic swordswomen to revenge those who wrong them by reporting a crime. While Fa Mu Lan's parents carved revenge on her body in the form of the names of those who had wronged her family, Maxine also learns to inscribe vengeance on her body by witnessing and reporting the crimes of American racism. She declares:

The swordswoman and I are not so dissimilar. May my people understand the resemblance soon so that I can return to them. What we have in common are the words at our backs. The idioms for revenge are "report a crime" and "report to five families." The reporting is the vengeance- not the beheading, not the gutting, but the words And I have so many words- "chink" words and 'gook' words too-that they do not fit on my skin. (53)

By retelling the stories and memories of No Name Woman(from her mother's version) and Fa Mu Lan (from The Ballad of Mulan and her mother's talk-story), Kingston imagines the inner lives, passions, fears and desires of the two women. The story of No Name Woman reveals that women's memories can become sites of a power struggle over truth claims among women themselves, in this case, between the mother's version and the daughter's invention of the story. The story of Fa Mu Lan shows that ethnic collective memory as conveyed by cultural myths can be used to claim ethnic and gender identities. For instance, Maxine identifies with Fa Mu Lan in order to claim an empowered Chinese American female heroic role as a woman warrior. Yet Kingston's memoir reveals that ethnic collective memory as found in cultural myths or legends should not be transmitted as it is, in its "original" form. For instance, she takes a fragment of the legend of Yueh Fei, the general who had words carved on his back, and incorporates it into her version of Fa Mu Lan. Kingston deliberately takes fragments of Chinese cultural texts and traditions- such as the stories of Mulan, Yueh Fei, and the poetess T'sai Yen to retrieve and to invent a new narrative. Thus the narratives of White Tigers and No Name Woman exemplify how Kingston evokes memory both as archeological excavation and as continuous revision and ultimately translates and retranslates them to understand her female Chinese-American subjectivity.

In the third chapter named ‘Shaman’, Kingston’s mother Brave Orchid decides to retain her own name rather than take her husband’s after they are married. The power to name oneself, to have an individual identity, is further emphasized when Brave Orchid, after arriving in America, keeps her own name rather than westernize it. Using her gift for talk-story, Kingston fights the many paradoxes in her life with words rather than with a sword. ‘Shaman’ is arguably the novel’s most pivotal chapter. It contains Kingston’s mother, Brave Orchid’s personal history, how she earned a medical degree of midwifery in China, then moved to America to be with her husband, and raised their American-born children. The chapter’s title, a tribute to Brave Orchid, refers to a person who acts as a medium between the physical and spiritual worlds, and who usually has healing powers. Brave Orchid is a shaman who exorcises ghosts, both in the Chinese women’s school of midwifery and in Stockton, California.

The following chapter, ‘At the Western Palace’ is told in the third person and it has a moral for Brave Orchid herself as well as all her daughters. The chapter is centering on the narrator’s maternal aunt Moon Orchid. She is a silent woman who neither voices her own desires nor demands anything from her husband who “made her live like a widow” all through her life (178). She waits silently without ever questioning her husband’s new life or attempting to change her own. Coming to America as an old woman, Moon Orchid is not able to adopt to her new “home” and survive its challenges. She comes to ‘the Western Palace’ but she cannot reside there; neither can she replace her previous identity of the waiting wife with a valid new identity. Although ‘At the Western Palace’ seems less of a talk-story than the previous chapters, Kingston is strengthened by recalling Moon Orchid’s struggle to assimilate in America. In the final chapter ‘A Song For A Barbarian Reed Pipe’, Kingston discusses further the difficulties she experienced growing up as a Chinese- American female. This chapter connects the previously introduced themes of women’s silence and powerlessness with women’s voice and power and brings them home as it deals with the silence of Chinese girls growing up in America. Greatest among these challenges was learning to speak English to non-Chinese people, while struggling to confront traditional Chinese culture, represented by her mother, which inhibited her efforts to integrate fully into American culture. She searches to locate a middle ground in which she can live within each of these two respective cultures; while doing so, she creates a new, hybrid identity between them. Likening herself to knot-maker who, long ago in China, would have continued to create a

special, intricate knot even after the emperor banned its being made, Kingston tests the boundaries that her mother, Chinese culture, and American culture erect to manipulate her every thought and action.

Kingston recognizes that gender, identity and memory are dialogical and that one's gender and ethnic identities can be influenced by personal memory. If the patriarchal Chinese diaspora tends to evoke memories of homeland and cultural traditions as sites of nostalgia, Kingston shows that the nostalgic gaze and sentiment can ignore and disguise the practices of sexual and gender inequality both in the homeland China and in the diaspora. She attempts to rewrite and to subvert both the collective memories of the Chinese diaspora in America and the national official memories of the nation-state to claim a feminist postcolonial sexual space, identity and voice. In the process, Kingston reveals that women are the transmitters of generational, counter-cultural, or collective memories through everyday talk-stories.

Kingston attempts to rewrite both Chinese diasporic memory by challenging its sexism and the national official memory of the United States by pointing to its history of gender inequality, racism and orientalism. A Chinese diasporic feminist identity is thus presented through autobiographical, familial and ethnic remembrance. She uses memory as a tool to challenge and to subvert traditional gender ideology; and the relation between memory and storytelling. Kingston is conscious that the process of recovering, retranslating, and transmitting personal, familial, and ethnic collective memory is always fractured, negotiated, and a product of struggle. Hence it destabilizes constructions of identity and community formation along with knowledge production.

The work explores the complex experiences of the immigrants who see hopelessness in China and financial opportunity and cultural superiority in the west. Kingston's mother feels to be in the middle of the process of adaptation. She is in conflict to choose her identity. The consequence is that she feels that she has two identities: Chinese and American. She hangs between hope and disillusionment. The result of leading two lives is not a double vision but schizophrenia which is the failure to adapt to reality. So she becomes a failure not only in adapting herself to the new land but also she is blind towards her identity as a Chinese. Her self-

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image changes because she has been identified as the ‘other’ in the emigrated land. As a creative writer, Kingston’s expatriate experience leads her to compare China and America. Like her characters she too immigrated to America in order to earn money and lead a prosperous life. The alienation she feels in the new land and her attachment to the homeland often come in conflict with each other. As she experiences a sense of alienation, she wishes to come back to China and rejoin her community. She compares her native land with a multi-cultural nation like America. There is a sense of loss and a feeling of nostalgia in them.

The rootlessness, insecurity and adverse financial conditions are the factors that place the emigrants under pressure. The absence of a sense of home creates anger and resentment in the migrants. As Avtar Brah observes, “home” is a mythic place of desire in the diasporic imagination. It is a place of no- return, even if it is possible to visit the geographical territory that is seen as the place of “origin” (192). The emigrants who live ‘border lives’ “find [themselves] in the moment of transit where space and time cross to produce complex figures of difference and identity, past and present, inside and outside, inclusion and exclusion”( Bhabha 1).The fragmentation, discontinuity and displacement they experience in the new land are really poignant. “Too often diaspora peoples have been ghettoized and excluded from feeling they belong to the ‘new country’ and suffered their cultural practices to be mocked and discriminated against” (McLeod 208). Diaspora denotes the communities of displaced or relocated people from their homelands to Newlands for social, political or economic reasons.“The grounded certainties of roots are replaced with the transnational contingencies of routes”(McLeod 215). The immigrant writers are forced to write from the margins and therefore the focus of their work is off-centered, it is not his/her-story being narrated, but a narration of the alienation, hybridization, marginalization, community life or the local or national politics. Diasporic subjects are marked by hybridity and heterogeneity- cultural, linguistic, ethnic, and national and these subjects are defined by a traversal of the boundaries demarcating nation and diaspora.

The problems faced by the immigrant women were earlier undermined or ignored as if they did not face problems of adjustment in an unknown land and an alien culture or are not discriminated in the new culture. The characters move through a process of psychological accommodation and cultural assimilation as they build new identities in new lands. Experiences of women in the host society, to a certain extent, continue to be shaped according to their

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position in their native and structural setting. Even though the minor identity is shaped by essentialist notions of ethnicity, race and gender propagated by patriarchal institutions; migration absolves women from the stronghold of male superiority by offering them ample opportunities to play a more active role in the public sphere. In spite of the limitations inherent in such a framework they do manage to reconfigure and reconstitute identities by renegotiating to an extent, the gender and family structures they have left behind and the ones they encounter after their arrival. They are subject to a radical historicization, and are constantly in the process of change and transformation.

In *The Woman Warrior* Kingston reveals that identity is not coherent but is rather fractured and destabilized a struggle in which different memories attempt to undermine identity with obvious gaps and uncertainties. However, memory, because of its fluidity and ambivalence, also provides the creative space and freedom for the writer, Kingston to play with and to refashion her identity in this memoir. By invoking the invention of memory and autobiography, Kingston is able to raise epistemic questions about history, cultural production, experience, truth and selfhood. Identity, memory, historical narrative and knowledge production are situated between nonfiction and fiction, real and unreal. Kingston also views the self as affected by multiple external forces: the ideology of race, class, and gender; American and Chinese cultural knowledge; and social structures, institutions, laws and policies. She explores the quest of a unique and particular self, one that is female and one whose experience of growing up is both Chinese and American. Caught between two cultures and the product of both, Kingston's protagonist Maxine, in order to find her authentic self, must negotiate the contradictions between her two worlds before discovering and valorizing her individual cultural uniqueness and otherness from each. Kingston's and her protagonist Maxine's quest for identity actually occurs on three levels, those of gender, ethnicity and nationality. It involves confronting her otherness—first, as a woman in patriarchal society; secondly as a member of an ethnic minority in America; and finally, as an English speaking American within a “real” Chinese family. It is only through painfully confronting, acknowledging, and validating her otherness at all three levels that she discovers her true individual self and its connections with and place within community and family.

Kingston's autobiography becomes her way of being a woman warrior on her own behalf and perhaps on behalf of other Chinese girls and women. She had found a way to exact revenge against her background and yet to honor it. In crying out to the world about her culture's mistreatment of women, she has in a sense taken on the warrior role her culture recommended to those of its women most capable of heroism. In finding a literary form and techniques which allow her to give voice to the conflicts and contradictions which almost silenced her, Maxine Hong Kingston is paying tribute to the importance her family and culture have always placed on the verbal imagination.

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