

A Pattern of Possibility: Maxine Hong Kingston's *Woman Warrior*

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Maxine Hong Kingston is one of the many contemporary American novelists of non-European ethnicities and one of many women novelists who have found in mythology and folklore both stories and images which can transform the genre by providing "novel" patterns of order and "meronymic" language. These inclusive patterns and words help expand our perspective as they encompass both the linear and cyclical stories of the individual within the context of communal and social, mythic and historic, truths. In *The Woman Warrior*, the complex "frog knot" of her female heritage is untied for us not only to open up women's possible stories but also to offer her readers the variety which keeps us sane, freeing us from a dominant discourse which convincingly describes the inevitable tragedy of our common death but often fails to remind us of the simultaneous richness of our uncommon lives.

"The contribution of mythology," Clyde Kluckhohn has explained, "is that of providing a logical model capable of overcoming contradictions in a people's view of the world and what they have deduced from experience."¹ Usually we interpret this concept to mean that myths provide human explanations for natural phenomena, but it seems equally applicable to overcoming *social* contradictions. Perceiving contemporary reality within the greater context of their inherited myths and legends enables some contemporary American novelists of non-European ethnicities to overcome the contradictory ways in which their "people" are seen both within the ethnic community and within the larger American society. As a native-born Chinese American, for instance, Maxine Hong Kingston will never be either "Chinese" or "American"; she is both by

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definition. Within her own self these social contradictions must be overcome and encompassed, which does not necessarily mean they will ever be resolved.²

The novel is the literary genre precisely designed to explore social definitions of the individual, but in American literature the novel has been dominated by the *mythos* of tragedy, the plot which proceeds linearly to a climactic action and aims at a final resolution of conflicts by the end of the novel. Certainly this tragic mode is itself "a logical model capable of overcoming contradictions," but the Greek mythos upon which it is patterned is not the only way of telling our human story. "Americans" from non-European ethnicities have often been exposed to quite different myths which develop along "other" logical patterns. This literature of the American "other" seems to have much in common, whether its alternative cultural source is Asian, Native, Latina/o, or African American. In each case, cultural mythmaking includes patterns which promise new beginnings rather than resolutions, which circle back through time and space to center the individual storyteller in communal traditions. Rather than the linear, instrumental rationality which seeks its inevitable end, this cyclical, associative rationality seeks to establish its centrality within the many contexts of which it is a part. The self and this time and place achieve their individuality by discovering the cumulative stories which can be recognized and encompassed by the human imagination.

Much fiction by women writers in patriarchal cultures can also be seen in this light. Studies such as my own *Worlds Within Women* have traced the oral tradition of pre-patriarchal Goddess cultures as the "cultural otherness" upon which these women writers have drawn, rejecting the definitions of reality offered by the dominant discourse, and turning to forms defined by that definition as fantasy in order to explore the "whole story."³

Conversely, Maxine Hong Kingston and other women writers will draw from the "real world" of family and history in order to create the "whole story" in their fiction. Each attempts to overcome the artificial boundaries which "marginalize" her in order to center herself in her own traditions and see fully in each direction from where she finds herself.

Because the novel is an artifact as well as a language art, it can be shaped by the author artist into the form which best expresses the story being told. Although that story is always a version of the common human story, its universal significance becomes clear only when it is firmly centered in its own traditions, its own *mythos* or pattern of possibility. Furthermore, only when we read the words and connect them in the pattern provided by the author do we understand what stands under, what orders, the actions of the story. The "other" American literature is best able to offer us the "whole" of our common story in "novel forms" which encompass both the linear and cyclical, the predictable and possible, the visible and invisible, the historical and the mythic, because

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these "marginal" writers are best positioned to see beyond the dominant myths. They too, as Americans, have learned that discourse and acknowledge the tragic truth of death as an inevitable resolution of each individual life. However, from the margins of that story, they are well positioned to turn to the "other" story, and that position is enhanced by the still living myths which have been preserved orally and are offered them within their ethnic communities.⁴

I have called their novels "meronymic" precisely because of this more encompassing perspective from which they are told and the "novel orders" it has given their fictions. A meronym—from the Greek *mero* which means "part"—is a composite or cumulative image. Even a word, such as grey, can be meronymic: grey is composed of a balance of black and white but is itself neither black nor white. It is this great but finite variety of different balances of black and white which is defined by the single word. So too is Kingston's perspective socially meronymic, since being Chinese American is not the same as either being Chinese or fitting the dominant definition of Euro-American society. As an artist, Kingston seeks meronymic language, imagery, and understanding of characters and actions to convey her expanded vision of our common story. She best achieves this in her novel *The Woman Warrior*, which, with its companion work *China Men*, is rooted in her own personal, familial, and cultural experiences. Since both Chinese and American societies are patriarchal, however, the problem of gender has forced her to explore her paternal and maternal heritages separately. Since she is female and her mother was the "storyteller" of the family, it is within her maternal heritage that Kingston has the greatest access to the cultural myths which provide her with the "other" parts of her own story.

Therefore, while *The Woman Warrior* has a beginning, middle, and end which allows us to read its linear "progression" from silence to song through the conflict between mother and daughter at its center, it offers simultaneously a cyclical pattern which allows us to emerge from its mythic and artistic "knotmaking" with an expanded appreciation both of the individual self in which the mother finds contemporary expression through her daughter and of this moment of time in which our place has become the planet and our community the human family. Although Kingston's book won non-fiction awards as autobiography, it can only be fully appreciated and understood as a novel, depending more on what Kingston describes as "imagined life" than on historically precise information about individuals. Balancing the personal, historic, and mythic throughout, Kingston the writer condenses time and place into the mind of Kingston the character, who learns to follow the twists and loops of the many stories which together define her life. The storytelling process itself creates the "outlawed knot" which Kingston offers us as a "novel" pattern of possibility.

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Art, of which the novel is but one form, has always offered its unified vision of the human condition, a "truth" which transcends seemingly contradictory realities by encompassing them in an ordered whole. So too has myth been acknowledged, as Mircea Eliade reminds us, as the "**absolute truth**" and "**sacred history**" of the culture from which it comes.⁵ Since the Greek **mythos** can be translated as plot to reveal the connections between the pattern of the novel and the patterns of myth, it is not just the allusions from myth incorporated in such novels but even more importantly the basic pattern of the novel which reflects the cultural "**absolute truth**" which undergirds its story. To understand that story, we must appreciate what "stands under" it.

In *The Woman Warrior*, for instance, Kingston creates a "novel" order as well as incorporating allusions to both Chinese and family history and myth in her exploration of her female self. As Shirley K. Rose has argued, "The particulars of the story are less interesting than her telling of that story, for Kingston's narrative brings together 'reality' and 'myth' from the perspectives of both the Chinese culture and American culture."⁶ Nor should we separate either the "reality" or the "myth" from Kingston's unique perspective on both; as she explains in the novel, she must come to her own understanding of her inherited myths because "How can Chinese keep any traditions at all? They don't even make you pay attention, slipping in a ceremony and clearing the table before the children notice specialness."⁷ "Don't see how they kept up a continuous culture for five thousand years," she complains. "Maybe they didn't ; maybe everyone makes it up as they go along. If we had to depend on being told, we'd have no religion, no babies, no menstruation (sex, of course, unspeakable), no death."⁸

Nor does Kingston want to confront "Chinese culture" in its historical accuracy, or even in China. Her "Chinese culture" consists of her family stories of the "homeland" she has never visited and the lifestyle of Chinese Americans. "I was describing the place that we Americans imagine to be China. They mythic China has its own history, smells, flowers, one hundred birds, long-lived people, dialects, music," she explains in her essay "Imagined Life." "If I had gotten on a plane and flown to the China that's over there, I might have lost the imagined land."⁹ Thus the process Kingston uses to create her novel involves realistic details of a mythic China and mythic training for an autobiographical narrator raised in contemporary America.

True to her traditions, Kingston must encompass the linear story within the cyclical pattern, eschewing the linear tightrope of chronological plot to order her story. Rather, the story takes place as it is written, and memories of the personal, historical, and mythic past blend with direct observation and rational analysis of the present moment to place the reader in the landscape of the writer's imagination. The artistic pattern of that landscape takes shape as Kingston crafts an intricate twisting of five

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knots from her own story-line, her own life, each one curling in on itself to form one of the five sections of the book. The narrator explains her artistic process at the beginning of the final section, "A Song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe." She has taken her brother's brief and already second-hand version of her aunt's story as the basis for the previous chapter and has transformed it:

His version of the story may be better than mine because of its bareness, not twisted into designs. The hearer can carry it tucked away without it taking up much room. Long ago in China, knot-makers tied string into buttons and frogs, and rope into bell pulls. 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 anymore. If I had lived in China, I would have been an outlaw knot-maker.¹⁰

Kingston identifies with the Chinese outlaw knot-maker as she follows the twistings of her female heritage and traces how it "branches into" her own life, creating in the process the five-chapter intricately interwoven "frog knot" from the single storyline that comprises her own upbringing as a Chinese American daughter. Paternal aunt, mythic woman warrior, mother, maternal aunt, and an historical exiled Chinese poetess receive individual sections and yet reveal themselves to be part of the possibilities that shape the narrator herself, as is the young playmate she abuses in the final section whose silence threatens to become her own.

However, each character's story is limited by the narrator's use of it, for only inasmuch as she can imagine these women in her own mind, her own life, and conversely imagine herself in their lives are they important to her story. The present rather than the past determines the life Kingston chooses to imagine for each woman. Thus, the narrator refuses to believe that "No Name Woman," her paternal aunt, might have committed adultery because she was sexually promiscuous: "Imagining her free with sex doesn't fit, though. I don't know any women like that, or men either. Unless I see her life branching into mine, she gives me no ancestral help."¹¹

As Kingston's narrator discovers and constructs her own multiple identity in *The Woman Warrior*, she creates anew the inherited culture hero myths of the first woman warrior and of the poetess Ts'ai Yen by recognizing herself as their contemporary expression. She too is a "swordswoman" motivated by, carrying "on her back," the words of her people; she too must sing her own song among "barbarians." Simultaneously she recognizes that she is the contemporary expression, the culmination, of the female line from which she has descended, which helps her to realize fully the shared stories of her father's disowned "no-

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name" sister, her mother's earlier life as a medical student and doctor in China, and even the "madness" which overcomes her mother's culturally-uprooted sister Moon Orchid when she cannot overcome the contradictions which greet her in America.

The center loop of this complex knot of relationships which Kingston must unwind—must imagine and write about—to open the stories of her female ancestry is the story of her mother, which she calls "Shaman." While her mother is also Kingston's source and model for her gift for "talk-story," "Shaman" identifies her role as a doctor in China, which is denied her in America. Her mother, Brave Orchid, is able in this section to face ghosts as well as medical emergencies, as the women medical students are trained in both the science and the magic spells which heal the body and spirit. In America, Brave Orchid must work in a laundry and heal with "talk-story." The differences between mother and daughter, China and America, then and now, are acknowledged and encompassed rather than resolved as the narrator accepts her own role as storyteller and transforms that role to fit the realities of the present moment. She will give the explanations that are never given and write down the stories which were preserved only in her mother's oral "talk-story" tradition in order to offer a contemporary version of the myth, a **mythos** of her own in the order of her novel, to a contemporary world which desperately needs explanations, needs to know the words, and needs a more encompassing pattern. The "wordswoman" that she has become encompasses as well the "woman warrior" role:

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 ideographs 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.¹²

The narrator's ethnic heritage is continuously re-experienced as coterminous with the American context in which she has matured, and her individuality is discovered within her communal roles. Kingston's intricate knot-making enables the reader to realize that history is myth and myth is history, that the personal is communal and vice versa. As we return to a mythic China to discover her real aunt being ostracized in an historic village ceremony condemning her adultery, we also remain with the narrator in contemporary America who must imagine plausible reasons why a woman who shares her ethnic heritage would give up her social status by getting pregnant and then kill herself and her child. Each twist of the knot is imaginative but rooted in the realities of human history.

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We know that only one or maybe none of the "resolutions" given actually motivated this personal act, but we also know that each resolution is possible and **could** have motivated this or a similar act by a similar woman.

Linking myth and reality, Kingston can identify the words at our backs—the words that motivate our actions—and the very **telling** of her version of our story offers us other choices, other patterns. She provides the words particular to her family as a definition of self, those particular to her ethnic heritage as the inescapable "other" demands of community, the plot incidents particular to her female gender as the social impact of belonging to **two** patriarchal societies, and the seemingly contradictory demands of her American context and her Chinese community as twists in an unending knot which her narrator must unwind to know the "whole story" of who she is and thus to escape madness. "The difference between mad people and sane people,' Brave Orchid explains to her children, 'is that sane people have variety when they talk-story. Mad people have only one story that they talk over and over.'"¹³ By sharing her complex skills as a meronymic storyteller, Kingston is offering her reader the variety which keeps us sane, freeing us from a dominant discourse which convincingly describes the inevitable tragedy of our death but fails to re-mind us of the simultaneous richness of each moment of our lives.

With her complex knot-making ability, Kingston reveals that we too must follow the twists of our own lives through family, community, and social versions and know in our own selves the order we can achieve, the work of art we can create by constructing our own story from its many components. When rejecting any of the components means sacrificing parts of the self, is not the meronymic perspective, the both/and, a way to start evaluating and appreciating what we have received from each source and selecting which of their imagined lives we want to include in our self-portrait? When the novel is made new through fresh perspectives, when the story balances personal, historical, and mythic truths; then the "storyline" can be spread out, un-knotted, or looped to reveal the simultaneous realities of many cultures, many times, and many places as they repeat the "**absolute truth**" of myth in this culture, this time, this place.

"There is only the eternal present, and biology," Kingston's narrator explains to her mother as she takes on the role of storyteller, and "We belong to the planet now, Mama. Does it make sense to you that if we're no longer attached to one piece of land, we belong to the planet? Wherever we happen to be standing, why, that spot belongs to us as much as any other spot."¹⁴ Telling the "whole story" from a meronymic perspective, an encompassing vision which expands our definitions of self, family, community, and society, is essential in our contemporary "world village" in which we too "belong to the planet." Kingston reminds

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us that the human imagination is capable of such stretching—is free of the boundaries which separate us in this time and place because there, as St. Augustine explained long ago, "[t]he present of things past is the memory, the present of present things is direct perception; and the present of future things is expectation."¹⁵

Notes

¹Clyde Kluckhohn, "Recurrent Themes in Myth and Mythmaking," in *Myth and Mythmaking*, ed. Henry A. Murray (Boston: Beacon, 1968), 46-60.

²Throughout this article, the term "American" will be used to refer exclusively to citizens of the United States, who have appropriated that term to identify their own literature, and particularly to the dominant discourse of that literature, ignoring not only intra-national diversity, but also the international character of the two American continents.

³Thelma J. Shinn, *Worlds Within Women: Myth and Mythmaking in Fantastic Literature by Women* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1986). While this study explores fiction by women from Doris Lessing to Octavia E. Butler who expand our perceptions of reality beyond the literary demands of Realism, such recent writers as Toni Morrison and Louise Erdrich have followed the lead of Eudora Welty in *The Golden Apples* by transforming Realism itself into a meronymic hybrid in which the simultaneity of shared mythologies inform our understanding of the present moment. For Welty, Greek and Celtic traditions manifest themselves in Mississippi as Natchez Trace folklore, while Morrison couches West African cautionary tales in Christian symbolism, and Erdrich explores the roots in Nature of stones strung as Cree prayerbeads or Catholic rosaries in *Love Medicine*.

⁴Just as Kingston has an "other" story of possibilities for women when her mother sings her the tale of Fa Mu Lan, women writers offer other possibilities for their characters from such African traditions as Toni Cade Bambara's "mud mothers" in *The Salt Eaters*, Native American traditions as Leslie Marmon Silko's "Yellow Women" transformations, and Latina traditions as the clairvoyance of Clara in Isabel Allende's *The House of the Spirits*. The typical character of Realism is thus revealed as typical of the dominant culture only, while the possibilities unveiled through myth and folklore find cognates in other traditional tales as well. If in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* Nettie is surprised to find "Uncle Remus" stories among the Olinka, it is the pattern of such a story that the blond

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Squeak earns freedom for Sophie from a white sheriff in the South.

⁵Mircea Eliade, *Myths, Dreams and Mysteries*, tr. by Philip Mairet (New York: Harper & Row, 1957), 23.

⁶Shirley K. Rose, "Metaphors and Myths of Cross-Cultural Literacy," *MELUS* 14:1 (Spring 1987): 5-16.

⁷Maxine Hong Kingston, *The Woman Warrior* (New York: Random House, 1977), 215.

⁸Kingston, 216.

⁹Maxine Hong Kingston, "Imagined Life," in *Women's Voices: Visions and Perspectives*, eds. Pat C. Hoy II, Esther H. Schor, and Robert DiYanni (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1990): 137-44.

¹⁰Kingston, *Woman Warrior*, 189-90

¹¹Kingston, *Woman Warrior*, 10.

¹²Kingston, *Woman Warrior*, 62-63.

¹³Kingston, *Woman Warrior*, 184.

¹⁴Kingston, *Woman Warrior*, 124-25.

¹⁵St. Augustine, *Confessions*, tr. by R. S. Coffin (London: Penguin Books, 1961), 269.