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Constructing / Writing the (Chinese American Female) Self: Narrative Technique in Maxine Hong Kingtson's *The Woman Warrior*

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The talking women start their best gossip with "Don't tell" to make the listener feel extra special, and to give the story importance.
And to free themselves to tell. "Don't tell" means "Tell"
— Maxine Hong Kingston,
Through the Black Curtain

"It will take a long time" she said, "but the story must be told,"
— Leslie Marmon Silko
Storyteller

Within Asian American discourse, many Asian American writers have used the form of the family narrative to delineate their contradictory condition of 'doubleness.' These two incongruous worlds of being Asian and American simultaneously, in many of their family narratives, are presented in the conflict between immigrant parents and their American-born children[1]. However, it was not until Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts* was published in 1975 that Asian American family narrative was narrated in the first-person woman's voice so openly and vociferously. Delineating a contemporary Chinese American woman's condition of 'doubleness', *The Woman Warrior* provides us with a family narrative that consistently centers around a daughter-narrator's maternal lineage. In one sense, Kingston's tracing the matrilineal history within the family reflects the fact that the writing of

mothers and daughters has become a common thematic concern for ethnic minority women writers as well as their Caucasian counterparts especially since 1970's.[2] While *The Woman Warrior* significantly illustrates a daughter-narrator's struggle in constructing her own voice to tell her 'doubleness', it also articulates the necessity to acquire one's own voice to tell.[3]

The Woman Warrior embodies the narrator's and the writer's search for the self in the narrative act. In one way or another, the act of 'telling' appears as a source of 'empowerment' for the narrator/writer in Kingston's presentation. That is, by telling about her life, the narrator/writer within the narrative seems to gain some kind of control or understanding over the events of her life. As a critic Nancy Walker argues, language represents power so that "acquiring and using language is a step toward understanding both self and power."(10) Accordingly, Kingston pays a particular attention to the significance of emerging as a storyteller. That is because, for those confronted by cultural and gender barriers, becoming the narrating "I" serves as an essential narrative strategy that allows them to revise and rewrite their past in their own terms.[4] Permeated throughout the five segments of *The Woman Warrior* most clearly, however ironically, is the difficulty of constructing one's own voice for the narrating "I", the narrator telling the stories. Instead of acquiring a coherent, solid and authoritative voice, the narrator's voice presented in the text is unstable and multivocal. Unlike a monolithic and self-reliant voice that controls conventional autobiography, the narrator's voice is an amalgamation of other women's voices, most dominantly conveying that of her mother's.

The Woman Warrior transgresses the conventional form of self-presentation in autobiography, which "pins on the idea of a single point of view of the dominant 'I'." (Mckay 26) The narrator/writer, in the conventional autobiographical presentation insists on the assertion of a unique, innate and essential self. The individual presented there, therefore, has a solid or stable sense of the self who is capable of making sense out of the sequences of his own past events. Traditional American autobiography traces the trajectory from 'immaturity' through 'youth' to 'maturity' progressing along a linear chronological line, which begins with some nascent sense of a self around adolescence, move through the overcoming of obstacles and reaches the fully-realized self, the writer/narrator who is engaged in reviewing himself at the very moment of writing. In other words, the 'goal' of

development of traditional autobiography is the presentation of the self-sufficient and materially wealthy person as we observe, for example, in Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography* (1818), an example of the dominant American temperament that emphasizes "the valorization of individualism" focusing on the success story. (McKay 27) What constitutes who the narrator is today or what has constructed him today in a traditional American autobiography, therefore, is reliable.[5]

The Woman Warrior violates the narrative pattern displayed in conventional autobiography. In the first place, for the narrator, the events that constitute 'who' she is today is not reliable for us and, moreover, for the narrator herself. She seems to lack a linear development toward self-realization or lack the expected 'goal' in her narrating. Instead of evolving chronologically, the text's narrative proliferates in more than one direction beyond time and space. Interweaving memories, imagination, fairy tales and the narrator's mother's 'talk-story' (a Chinese phrase for storytelling) the narrative moves back and forth between the reality of America and the imagined China; or between the narrator's childhood in Stockton Chinatown in California and her current life outside the insular Chinese American community; or between her mother's voice and her own. It is the amalgamation of these fragments that constitutes the narrator's investigation of soul in her autobiographical presentation.

Throughout the text, Kingston demonstrates how the act of 'telling' or acquiring the voice to tell the stories empowers one by juxtaposing the women who were silenced or chose to remain silent, and those who acquired their own voices. By contrasting the silenced and the 'talker', Kingston displays how the act of telling could make a difference. The third chapter "At the Western Palace" revolves around the story of the narrator's mother, Brave Orchid, and Brave Orchid's sister Moon Orchid, who has finally emigrated to the U.S. with her long-separated sister's help after thirty years. The two sisters appear to be contrasting. As her name, Moon(luna) implies lunatic, she finishes her life as an insane person without ever gaining power to articulate her selfhood. On the contrary, Brave Orchid, who is described as a "champion talker" by the narrator, is a powerful storyteller who demonstrates the power of 'telling' for her daughter.

As the narrator's mother and her sister contrasted greatly in their ability and willingness to engage in the act of 'telling', and consequently led

remarkably different lives, in the final chapter the narrator herself is engaged in a confrontation between speechlessness and the power of 'telling'. The final chapter, "A Song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe", in a sense, focuses on the narrator's own struggle to acquire her own voice. Paying particular attention to the American voice, the Chinese voice and consequently her own voice, the narrator enumerates her memories: from her kindergarten years and elementary school years to her current life. Knowing that "the silence had to do with being a Chinese girl," (W. 166) the narrator is not confident in fully understanding either Chinese or American cultures and languages but exists in between the two as a Chinese American woman. Being neither a total Chinese nor wholly American, she cannot successfully identify herself with either voice:

> Normal Chinese women's voices are strong and bossy. We whisper to make ourselves American-feminine. Apparently we whispered even more softly than the Americans. (172)

Even after she succeeds in escaping into the dominant American world purging the confining Chinese community, her life is disappointing and unsatisfactory. She "went away to college-Berkeley in the sixties" and "marched to change the world", however, she obviously "did not turn into a boy." (47) Moreover, in her new 'all-American' environment outside Chinatown, she encounters "stupid racists" with whom she could merely whisper in her "bad, small person's voice that makes no impact." (48,49)

What then is her own voice as a Chinese American woman? Searching for the answer to this question, the narrator's struggle for constructing her own voice is initiated. During the first three years of her elementary school, the period the narrator's "silence was thickest," she "enjoyed the silence." (186,166) However, once she realizes she needs to talk, "the silence became a misery." (166) Even at this moment of telling the very story, she is in the midst of constructing her voice, which is, accordingly, an on-going-process for her. Although she says, "I am making progress, a little every day," at the same time, "[a] dumbness — a shame — still cracks [her] voice in two, even when [she] want[s] to say 'hello' casually." (168)

The narrator, realizing how the silence never helps one gain control of

understanding over the self but merely disempowers one, confronts a silent Chinese American girl who never says a word even in the Chinese school, where most of the Chinese American children who "were silent at American school. . . found voice there." (168) One afternoon at the Chinese school, during the year she "was arrogant with talk, not knowing there were going to be high school dances and college seminars to set [her] back," (174) the narrator confronts and intimidates a 'mute' girl, who would not speak a word. Although the narrator appears to be vociferous, the 'mute' girl, indeed mirrors the narrator herself as she admits by saying that the two of them "were the same." (172) As the narrator "hated her for her China doll hair cut," (173) the 'mute' girl, who embodies the role of the perfect 'silent' Chinese girl, reflects the narrator herself who is incapable of breaking the Chinese American silence in the American environment. The narrator's persistence in making the 'mute' girl talk, then, reveals her fear of her own speechlessness. Thus her indignation against the girl in their confrontation indeed, reveals her self-hatred toward her own silence mirrored in the 'mute' girl.

What differentiates the narrator from the reticent girl is the presence of her mother. Appearing as a powerful talker in the third chapter, her mother, Brave Orchid, obviously demonstrates how the act of 'telling' can make a difference. Furthermore, she 'talkstory' on numerous Chinese village events, her family's and her own past to her daughter. Her intention to 'talkstory', however, is equivocal. While she is a powerful storyteller herself, the mother seemingly imposes the silence to the daughter in her 'talkstory.' For example, she qualifies her cautious tales with "Don't tell" or "You must not tell anyone." (3) Moreover, the mother evaluates the narrator as "Noisy. Talking like a duck. Disobedient. Messy." (197,202)

Among many of the mother's 'talkstory', an episode of her imaginary act of cutting off the narrator's tongue so that, as the mother explains later, the daughter-narrator "would not be tongue-tied" and would "be able to speak languages that are completely different from one another" (164) most pungently exposes the mother's intention conveyed in her storytelling. In the confrontation of the two powerful 'talkers'; the mother and the daughter, the mother's intention in this particular 'talkstory' is revealed as the mother says "I cut it to make you talk more, not less, you dummy. You're still stupid. You can't listen right." (202) " 'Don't tell' means 'Tell,' " says Kingston.

(*Black Curtain* 5) Similarly, the narrator's mother, in her contradictory 'talkstory', is demonstrating her daughter that the act of 'telling' could be a source of empowerment. Because, the mother's disclosing the disgraceful family secret of the adulteress aunt whose name is unspeakable by saying "Don't tell" is, indeed, a powerful act of subverting the expected role of remaining silent. However, it is only when the narrator realizes what her mother meant by saying, "We [Chinese] like to say the opposite," (203) that she is finally able to see that she "had been in the presence of great power, [her] mother talking-story." (19, 20)

It is, indeed, in *The Woman Warrior*, the narrator's mother who implicitly encourages her daughter to become an imaginative storyteller. The role of the mother who passes on the Chinese myths and stories to the daughter is manipulative and arbitrary; her motives for employing 'talkstory' are ambiguous. On the one hand, the mother seems to perpetuate the oppressive traditions and conventions the narrator is trying to resist; for example, she teaches her daughter that Chinese girls grow up to be nothing but "wives or slaves." (19) On the other hand, she provides the daughter with possible tools of liberation, as when she teaches her the chant of Fa Mu Lan, the legendary woman warrior. Thus, it is no wonder that the narrator is confused by the mixed messages her mother sends her. For a teenage-narrator who is struggling to resolve the contradictory worlds of the Chinese and American within the self, her mother's ambiguity in her 'talkstory' is dissatisfying. Thus, she has to confront her mother:

> "And I don't want to listen to any more of your stories; they have no logic. They scramble me up.
> You lie with stories. You won't tell me story and then say, "This is a story" or "This is just a story." I can't tell the difference. . . I can't tell what's real and what you make up." (202)

It is only later that the narrator realizes it was the mother's intention in her 'talkstory' that allowed her to become a manipulative storyteller herself. Unsatisfactory and confusing messages conveyed in the mother's 'talkstory', indeed, encourage the daughter to fantasize or imagine more satisfying endings and even recreate her own version of the stories. Moreover, while

reminding the daughter the Chinese heritage by passing down the old oppressive sayings, the mother simultaneously displays the power of storytelling, for example, by breaking the rule of keeping the story of 'No Name Woman' at the very beginning of the text.

Unlike the fixed form of the written stories, stories transmitted orally, from the teller to the listener, allow for a greater fluidity making it possible for the stories to be altered in the process of transmitting. The authority of the storyteller is that her stories are alive, coming from her own mouth, being passed down to her selected audience in her presence. It is the presence of the storyteller, who is responsible for controlling what should and what should not be passed on to the listener that differentiates the oral transmission of stories from the written ones most distinctly. Furthermore, it is the storyteller who is allowed to maneuver around the language she uses so that she can revise the story and present her own version instead. The storyteller "suffocates the code of lie and truth," says Trinh T. Minh-Ha. (Minh-Ha 134) Similarly, in *The Woman Warrior* the ambiguity in the mother's 'talkstory' suggests that the absence of clear answers provide the space to interpret the stories without being confined in the conclusive endings which "do not allow growth and evolution." (Walker 55)[6]

What, then, are stories the narrator needs to 'talkstory' in her own presentaion? With her ambiguous voice, the voice which is neither a total Chinese nor a total American, what stories does she find imperative to tell? The stories she presents in the course of her autobiographical presentation obviously are not circumscribed in the narrator's own experiences and memories. Interwoven with her own memories are those of the women's whose lives seemingly are obliterated by the passage of time but are, indeed, transmitted from her mother to her. It is her mother's history as well as those other women's histories that are irrevocable in the narrator's memories. Although the narrator lives in a contemporary American milieu, she is haunted by her heritage. As the text's subtitle, *Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts* implies, other women haunt the narrator like ghosts. These are the women like Moon Orchid and the 'mute' girl at the Chinese school who are incapable of promulgating their own lives. Even though their own voices were submerged and erased in the past, they constantly loom before the narrator.

The woman who haunts the narrator most is her ephemeral aunt who,

accepting the fate of an adulteress in a remote Chinese village in 1924, threw herself in the family well. Even though the aunt, who is nameless, is suffocated among silenced women whose lives are disremembered, for the narrator, the aunt's presence cannot be obliterated or attenuated. The nameless aunt, indeed, is impregnated into her memories:

> one would give her a family hall name. . . I have thought that my family. . . needed to clean their name, and a wrong word would incite the kinspeople even here.
> But there is more to this silence: they want me to participate in her punishment. And I have. . . In the twenty years since I heard the story I have not asked for details nor said my aunt's name; I do not know it. . . . My aunt haunts me — her ghost drawn to me because now, after fifty years of neglect, I alone devote pages of paper to her. . . I am telling on her. (14-16)

By telling or writing the world the forbidden story of the aunt, the narrator makes it possible to retrieve the presence of her effaced aunt. Moreover, by naming the first chapter, "No Name Woman" she literally names the nameless aunt: 'No Name Woman'. Giving her a name is imperative for the narrator in her own 'talkstory' or narrating because "the claiming or conferring of a name is an indication of selfhood" (Walker 61) and thus the aunt's acquisition of the name proclaims her presence most accurately. Moreover, the name itself is both symbolic and powerful. The name, "No Name Woman" refuses an attempt to circumscribe the person with a name which is the convention of a patriarchal society. The suspension of a conventional name evades the judgment from the society and thus becomes a characteristic of the name outside the tradition.

The past and the present are, in *The Woman Warrior's* narrative, interweaved, because, as Kingston says "[u]nderstanding the past changes the present. . .the ever-evolving present changes the significance of the past." (Rabinowitz 179) Similarly, Trinh T. Minh-Ha considers that "re-establishing the contact with her foremothers" enables minority women storytellers to realize "what is understood as the past continues to provide the link for Present and the future" and thus "t[h]e story tells us not only

what might have happened but also what is happening at an unspecified time and space." (Minh-Ha 148,149) The narrator's search for the self in the narrative act, thus, becomes possible only when the narrator redeems the voices of those who acquiesced to the pressures of patriarchal cultures by the act of telling on behalf of them. For the narrator, understanding herself means knowing those women who constitute who she is now. "[T]he tribal memory, the family memory, the cultural memory... I guess I contain them all in my own individual memory," says Kingston. (Rabinowitz 185) For the narrator, too, breaking the silence and interweaving the multiple voices in an autobiographical presentation serves as a source of empowerment in her process of shaping and constructing her voice apart from the conventions and traditions that are permeated in her American reality today. "The reporting is the vengeance — not the beheading, not the gutting, but the words" (53) says the narrator. Unlike Fa Mu Lan, the legendary woman warrior, who fight with her weapon, the narrator is a fighter without the sword. It is not the sword but the words that enables the narrator/writer to report disremembered past that haunts her. By presenting acquiescent multi-voices in her self-presentation, the narrator/writer succeeds in connecting the past with today's realities that constitute who she is.

At the end of the last chapter, the narrator declares that the text is a presentation of the two powerful manipulative female storytellers; the mother and the daughter. The narrator ends the text with the 'talkstory' about her grandmother and Ts'ai Yen, a poetess born in A.D. 175. The story is an amalgamation as she warns us beforehand that the story is a collaboration of the two arbitrary storytellers:

> Here is a story my mother told me, not when I was young,
> but recently, when I told her I also talkstory.
> The beginning is hers, the ending, mine. (206)

Although the story begins with her grandmother's love for the theatre, embracing her mother's ambiguity in storytelling, the narrator gradually leads us to the story of Ts'ai Yen. Since the mother/daughter's storytelling is fluid enough to transcend time and space transgressing the boundaries between memory and imagination, it is not possible to deduce where the mother's story ends and where the narrator's imagination begins in her

presentation. The ambiguity of the text's final 'talkstory' apparently suggests the fact that the narrator's presentation throughout the text itself, indeed, is constructed upon the ambiguous voice of the narrator who is engaged in subverting and revising established myths throughout her 'talkstory', taking an advantage of the authority given to the first-person-narrator.

Instead of presenting a conclusive ending, the text ends with an ambiguous 'talkstory' by the narrator. It is obviously left open-ended because the narrator's search for the self is an unending process of sorting out what constitute her: her girlhood, imagination, family, villagers, Chinatown, Berkeley, movies, her mother's 'talkstory' and other infinite elements. Constructing her own voice is, in *The Woman Warrior*, imperative for the Chinese American daughter-narrator; that is because it is only with her own voice, no matter how ambiguous or unstable it is, she is capable of keep rewriting and revising her self-definition. The emergence of successful Asian American women writers such as Kingston, Amy Tan and Cynthia Kadohata signifies that the time is ripe for them to present their versions of the American family narrative.[7] In their women-centered family narrative, that is narrated by a female voice, we can perhaps finally hear "America singing, the various carols. . . their strong melodious songs" responding to Walt Whitman's emphasis on the hybridity of America he expressed more than a century ago.

Notes

1 See Elaine Kim for the studies on the development of Asian American family narratives.

2 In the mid-1970's, Adrianne Rich stated that "cathexis between mother and daughter — essential, distorted, misused — is the great unwritten story" in her *Of Woman Born* (1976). Within the last two decades, along with psychological and sociological studies on the mother/daughter relationship, many women writers have engaged in tracing a feminist discourse of identity beginning with their mothers. For ethnic minority women writers, writing the mother/daughter narrative became significant because, according to Mairanne Hirsch, often times lacking advantages of race and class, they are "in a more distant relation to cultural and literary hegemony" than their Caucasian counterparts. Alice Walker, for example, speculates both her own mother and her literary ancestor Zora Neal Hurston in her essay "In Search of Our Mother's Garden" (1974).

3 Maxine Hong Kingston is one of the most well-known and successful contemporary Chinese American writers. Born and grew up in San Francisco area, Kingston currently teaches writing courses at University of California, Berkeley. Among her works are *China Men* (1977) and *Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book* (1987). Her debut work *The Woman Warrior* (1975) and *China Men*, in which Kingston recreates the history of Chinese American male immigrants, won the National Book Critical Circle Award for the best work of 'nonfiction'. *The Woman Warrior* is recognized as one of the contemporary literary works that has been most often adopted as a textbook in various university courses across the U.S. today.

4 See also Joanne S. Frye, *Living Stories, Telling Lives* for an excellent study of the first-person-narrative in contemporary women's works.

5 For an insightful study of the history of American autobiography as a genre, see Nellie Mckay, "Autobiography and the Early Novel," *Columbia History of the American Novel* (26-45).

6 See Nancy Walker, *Feminist Alternatives*, for an analytical survey which focuses on the use of irony and fantasy in the various novels written by women since 1970's. Walker argues that the contemporary women writers' frequent use of imagination and fantasy suggest their need for an alternative realities. Fantasy or imagination, according to Walker, serves as an empowering tool for these women narrators and writers.

7 Kingston repeatedly emphasizes that she is not Chinese but Chinese American: "The one thing about which I am absolutely sure... is that I am a Chinese American woman." (Pfaff 26) She underscores that her works, accordingly, are not

Chinese but, indeed, very American: "I think that my books are much more American than they are Chinese. I felt that I was building, creating myself and other people as American people, to make everyone realize that these are American people. Even though they have strange Chinese memories, they are American people." (Rabinowitz 182)

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