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Homeland, Reimagined in *The Woman Warrior*

Tran Le

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Short Analytical

The polemic against patriarchy and meditations on China as homeland in Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* has incited a long-running dispute within Asian American studies. Author Frank Chin's response, for one, questions Kingston's representation of Chinese people as backward and despotic and Chinese myths as some consumable ethnic legacies (Patterson 163). Chin denounces Kingston's depiction of the Confucian social system of beliefs heavily, arguing that it only seems patriarchal, despotic, and so overwhelmingly to her because she "lives entirely in [an] imagination" that is informed by Christian Chinese American stereotypes (qtd. in Patterson 163). At the crux of Chin's charge is the belief that Kingston has built a narrative that is "complicit with the Christian colonizing power" (Patterson 163). A closer look at Chin's challenges against *The Woman Warrior* reveals an assumed binary of the dominant Western culture and the victimized ethnic Other, one that presupposes that the postcolonial work can only either resist or accommodate the dominant culture's attitude. However, Kingston's autobiography has a social positioning that slightly diverts from this binary framing: she belongs to a collective of Chinese immigrants who must assimilate to their American host country for survival. This paper is an attempt to look at Kingston's Orientalist rhetoric as a strategic move that is both shaped by and responsive to the author's social orientation as a Chinese American. Kingston's stance, encapsulated in the "No Name Woman" story, is one that innovates the Chinese cultural legacies in ways that enable the narrator's process of collective identification with the Chinese American community in the context of global change.

Kingston's semi-autobiographical novel grips the reader right at its opening with a menacing message from the narrator's mother: "Don't tell anyone you had an aunt. Your father

does not want to hear her name. She has never been born,” an oppressive silencing that accompanies the heirloom story (Kingston 15). The following story, narrated by the protagonist’s mother, transplants the reader to a bewildering raid in a Chinese village. The narrative that Kingston employs here can come off as a forceful Orientalist dialectic featuring an irrational and inscrutable mob ostracizing their own kind, a promiscuous woman. The raid is wreaked on a household where a member -- the narrator’s aunt -- has committed adultery. The language and imageries employed in the story are raw and visceral, infusing the violent act with an exotic air of savagery and hysteria: “Their knives dripped with the blood of our animals. They smeared blood on the doors and walls. One woman swung a chicken, whose throat she had slit, splattering blood in red arcs about her” (Kingston). The depiction is forceful and the incident is no less grotesque: damned by the whole village and simultaneously brought shame to the whole family, Kingston’s mysterious aunt ends both hers and new-born’s life. Towards the end of this anecdote, Kingston’s mother simply warns 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” (5). This form of punishment, being erased from the memories of one’s community, has efficaciously held her in silence since the early days.

This anecdote per se with all its exotic, demonizing effect entirely deserves its charges of essentialism. However, when the narrator’s second perspective sets in, it seems that Kingston’s decision to render the story in her “Othering” rhetoric is one that evokes Gayatri Spivak’s “strategic essentialism” -- essentialist arguments that provokes political changes. In a way, Kingston’s use of the Othering language extends the conventional focus of the postcolonialist discourse: it draws attention to the diasporic Chinese people’s abuse of the essentialist narrative.

A potent element often overlooked by Kingston's dissenters in the "No Name Woman" story is the introspective consciousness that actively scrutinizes and reacts to the mother's rhetoric and the incentive underlying it. Kingston has observed how ornate her mother's account is despite her not witnessing the event first-hand: "My mother spoke about the raid as if she had seen it, when she and my aunt, a daughter-in-law to a different household, should not have been living together at all" (7). Wondering about why her mother might have tried to "[mark her] growing with stories" that depict "poverty, insanities" emphatically as if they are "the things in [her] that are Chinese," Kingston started to see the different underlying purposes of this storytelling style (5). She realizes the conflicting impulses that affected the emigrants' speech. There is the cultural legacy brought over from China that binds the diasporic community together -- a fearful compliance with social cohesion that is indicative in the mother's four words "The villages are watchful" (Kingston 5). Then, there is the inevitable need to acclimate to the new host society, the need to "figure out how the invisible world the emigrants built around our childhoods fits in solid America" (5). Already, there are fissures between these two needs: the Chinese identity demands strong communalism while the American one asks for heightened individualism. To repress these internal conflicts, the Chinese Americans in the narrator's experience tried to put aside their Chinese past by "[confusing] the gods by diverting their curses... [taking] new names... [and guarding] their real names with silence" (Kingston 5).

Understanding the conflicting orientations of the Chinese American identity is crucial to recognizing Kingston's strategic essentialism. Through "No Name Woman," Kingston revolutionizes her own reception of a story that exoticizes and vilifies her Chinese ancestors and in doing so, arrives at a much more thought-provoking dilemma at the heart of the Chinese

diasporic experience. Although Kingston is hesitant to take this misogyny as an essence of her Chinese cultural heritage, she acknowledges and sympathizes with her forerunners who have actually been oppressed by the old domestic traditions.

The confrontation of her ancestors' wrongs is a tension that continues to punctuate the story. At first, the narrator's logic abides with her mother's conservative attitude toward women's sexual promiscuity: how can these utilitarians, who devour every edible part of an animal raise this "lone romantic who gave up everything for sex" (6). However, she moves beyond this unthinking disapproval to look at the normalized oppression against women in Chinese culture. She becomes conscious of the detrimental constraints that Chinese marriages put on the women, that "the synonym for marriage in Chinese is 'taking a daughter-in-law!'" and the husband's parents could even sell, mortgage, and stone the daughters-in-law as they wished (8). She understands that her aunt's punishment has only been that grave because she has committed adultery in time of famine. She uncovers the fatalist belief that has granted the villagers to inflict the "consequences" of infidelity onto her aunt -- which is to kill the mother at the birth of her baby (13). Kingston's reflection on the death of the baby girl is a poignant jab at the brutal patriarchy: "Mothers who love their children take them along. It was probably a girl; there is some hope of forgiveness for boys" (15).

As the injustice of the Chinese patriarchy comes into focus, Kingston's narrative consciously rebels against the enduring punishment of her aunt. She literally disrupts this tradition of reception by juxtaposing the essentialist descriptions of her aunt's victimization with envisaged accounts that glorify her aunt's existence. Kingston frees her aunt from the easily consumable victimization of colonized women and instead, reimagines this woman as a

subversive heroine who has a lover and ended both hers and her baby's life by choice. Kingston envisions that her aunt, "caught in a slow life" and given to a young man who has been absent ever since their first night together, has kept her desires "delicate" yet alive (7). She revives her aunt's autonomy and sensuality from depicting the very guilt that has ended her life: her adultery. As a "wild woman" who needs rollicking company, Kingston imagines that this old woman has "combed individuality into her bob;" washed off a freckle that is said to "predestine her for unhappiness;" and even "worked at herself in the mirror, guessing at the colors and shapes that would interest him" (9). Finally, Kingston even glorifies her aunt's bravado by showing that her act of drowning herself in the water was strategic: "she was a spite suicide... The Chinese are always very frightened of the drowned one, whose weeping ghost... waits silently by the water to pull down a substitute" (16); her aunt becomes a ghost that is enabled to get back at the patriarchy that has ruined her. As her aunt gains agency through the reimagined story, Kingston also reconnects with her heritage and this time around finds a sense of empowerment from the story.

Throughout this reinvention of the story, Kingston interjects her own struggles with the traditions that have debilitated her female forerunners. Before, in spite of her wish to connect to her heritage and secure her cultural eccentricity, she receives no "ancestral help" but embellished cautionary stories about nameless faces (8). Resisting to silence her aunt's story, Kingston tries to see her aunt's life "branches into [hers]" (8). The narrator finds solidarity with her aunt through their mutual experience with the Chinese cultural precepts. In both the past story and her present, the narrator finds that communalism controls every aspect of living. The communal spirit, as the

narrator comes to find, results in the Chinese's habit of "[yelling] from room to room," and the unspoken rule of not keeping any "singularity" or "eccentricity" in appearance to oneself (9).

Driven by the impulse to connect with her elusive Chinese heritage, the narrator finds herself unconsciously following these traditional mannerisms. The Chinese "brothers and sisters, newly men and women," the narrator contends, "had to efface their sexual color... present plain miens," and have "eight million relatives" (11). Likewise, in her real life, the narrator reflects on how this obsolete tradition still constrains her sexuality: "I had no idea, though, how to make attraction selective, how to control its direction and magnitude... Sisterliness, dignified and honorable, made much more sense" (12). She looks at the tradition of repressed sexuality that runs in the family, shown through the demonization of "sexual mannerism" and the practice of regarding any opposite-sex acquaintances as kinsmen (12). The narrator admits, perhaps with embarrassment and unease, her habit of adding "'brother' silently to boys' names" (12).

At the end of "No Name Woman," the narrator seems to have established a new personal voice for both herself and her aunt: her parents want her to "participate in [her aunt's] punishment," but the mere act of retelling the story through a feminist, diasporic lens has already rebelled against their wish. In reconstructing her aunt's alternative fate as purposeful and autonomous has allowed Kingston to move between her American feminist identity and the patriarchal past of her Chinese culture. Thus, "No Name Woman" is a project that seeks not to represent an *authentic* past but a reality from which second-generation immigrant women like Kingston suffer. As for many women within many American diasporas, it is a break-through project that tears down the stagnant "patriotism" and one-way sympathy towards the homeland that have been so often foisted upon them before. Yet, "No Name Woman" offers no resolute

ending but only suggests a tentative direction for the Chinese diasporic descendants cast adrift in an American cultural hegemony. Paradoxically, it is perhaps through embracing the modern imagination of their Chinese homeland that these immigrants can preserve their elusive heritage.

Works Cited

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