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# First Words: Speech and Silence in Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* and Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*

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First Words: Speech and Silence in Maxine Hong Kingston's

*The Woman Warrior* and Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*

Silence and speech are two themes that often appear in tandem in literature.

Specifically in women's literature, silence and speech form a binary that is prevalent in depictions of women, women's relationships with each other and women's struggle with male-dominated society. A woman's ability to have a voice can be read as a reflection of her freedoms and identity, thereby making silence and speech significant when they appear in literary narratives. Speech and silence are not only intimately linked with personal identity, they are also gendered terms, and the woman is associated with silence. However, as we see in many literary texts, a woman can transcend the boundaries of a dominant culture, or the speech/silence binary, and find her own voice. It is through the process of learning orality that women are able to free themselves from the structures that restrain them.

Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* and Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* illustrate how women can transcend the socially expected, and often forced, silence of their dominant cultures by becoming champions of speech. This paper will take particular interest in three parallels between the two texts. First, I will examine how silence is enforced upon each text's protagonist, Kingston and Offred, paying careful attention to how each woman looks to female figures of the past, the No Name Woman and the previous Offred, as a reason to self-censor her own speech. However, while these

women remind Kingston and Offred to keep silent, they are also the catalysts that encourage each woman to find her own voice. Therefore, I will also explore how we can understand the silence of the No Name Woman and the previous Offred as a type of speech; each absent, ghostly figure communicates to their prospective successor through her silence. Finally, I will discuss how talk-story, a theme that appears most prominently in *The Woman Warrior*, is the ultimate emancipation for each protagonist. It is through memoir and the incident with the Quiet Girl that Kingston frees herself from silence, and it is through recording her traumatic story that Offred transcends the oppressive culture of Gilead. Therefore, using these two texts, the importance of speech and silence in female narrative becomes evident, as does the many ways in which women can ‘speak’ and communicate under a dominant structure.

Social expectations of female silence are not imposed on Kingston and Offred by powerful male figures but by other women. In order to maintain the status quo, dominate culture has strategically developed apparatuses, in the form of other women, to reproduce female silence. In both texts, the process of women silencing other women has become powerful enough that women self-censor in order to avoid reprimand. In both novels, self-censorship is maintained by each protagonist recalling the unfortunate fates of women who came before them.

In *The Woman Warrior*, Kingston is often silenced by her mother, Brave Orchid; however, Kingston asserts that it is her mother’s account of her aunt, the No Name Woman, that accelerated her own self-censorship. Brave Orchid’s account of the No Name Woman is disclosed to Kingston as a warning of what ‘deviance’ and individuality results in for the Chinese female but also to test Kingston on her ability to keep silent:

“Don’t let your father know that I told you. He denies her...Don’t humiliate us. You wouldn’t like to be forgotten as if you were never born” (5). Kingston learns from her mother that a deluge of humiliation and destruction befell her family’s household in China when her aunt bore an illegitimate child<sup>1</sup> and subsequently committed suicide. Through this story Kingston learns what it means to be a woman in her culture and the requirement to keep silent about those who, like her aunt, defy feminine codes. As a result of her betrayal, the No Name Woman and her sexual acts are shrouded in silence, and she is wholly forgotten, as if she were never born. Kingston is relentlessly warned by her mother that she “must not tell anyone” (3) about her aunt; thus, Kingston self-censors herself from communicating her aunt’s story for fear of repercussions and because she has internalized her family’s perception of her aunt: “I have thought that my family...needed to clean their name, and a wrong word would incite the kinspeople” (16). Therefore, Kingston “participate[s] in her [aunt’s] punishment” (16) by remaining silent. According to King-Kok Cheung, “to expunge her [aunt’s] name, to delete the memory of her life, is perhaps the cruelest repudiation her kin could devise. No less cruel is the silencing of the living” (164). Kingston is, therefore, both an aggressor and a victim; she conceals the No Name Woman’s story, perpetuating her aunt’s sentence and at the same time learns to be voiceless and unquestioning. Layers of silencing exist in Kingston’s culture; her mother and the memory of her aunt silence the young Kingston.

Like Kingston, Offred in *The Handmaid’s Tale* is silenced by other women and self-censored by a ghost from the past. In fictional Gilead, women silence other women within the culture. Offred is silenced not only by her Commander’s wife, Serena Joy, but

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<sup>1</sup> as a result of either rape or adultery

also by Aunts, other Handmaids and Marthas. Like Kingston, Offred learns how a handmaid should behave in Gilead by being controlled by other women. However, Offred self-censors regarding information about the handmaid who came before her: the previous Offred: “Someone has lived in this room, before me. Someone like me” (62). Despite her deep curiosity, Offred censors her questions regarding the mysterious handmaid. Like Kingston learns about the No Name Woman, Offred senses that speaking of the previous handmaid is not tolerated in the Commander’s household. When asking Rita about the unexplained woman, Offred receives little information: “Who was the woman who stayed in that room? I said. Before me? ... But Rita clamped her lips together. I am like a child here, there are some things I must not be told” (66). Similarly, Offred complies with the expected behaviours of the handmaids in order to remain alive. The previous Offred’s suicide is a constant reminder to Offred that she should comply with the expectations the dominant order has of handmaids to avoid repercussions. These reminders challenge Offred’s resistance to her society and lead her to moments of profound self-doubt: “Everything I’ve resisted, comes flooding in. I don’t want pain ...I want to keep on living, in any form” (357). Therefore, “this unknown woman” (65) becomes a No Name Woman to Offred, a figure who reminds her to remain compliant in a culture that insists upon female silence.

The No Name Woman and the previous Offred do not sustain their identities as spirits that enforce silence upon their respective protagonists but transform, in fact, into the catalysts that prompt Kingston and Offred to discover their own voice. This transformation is evident to the protagonists in retrospect, as both framed narratives are composed after the events of the texts. The No Name Woman and the previous Offred not

only become symbols of speech but also actively communicate with Kingston and Offred, dialogues that crescendo as each protagonist finds her own voice.

In *The Woman Warrior*, Kingston transforms the forgotten No Name Woman into a figure of perseverance, deriving strength from her ghostly aunt and coming to terms with her compliance and resistance to her culture. Cheung suggests, “Maxine speculates about the aunt she is forbidden to mention and attempts to conjure the circumstances that could have resulted in an affair. In one imaginary version the aunt is not a rape victim but a seducer. As a rebel—a breaker of conventions—she is Maxine’s ‘forerunner’” (167). By characterizing her aunt as one who defies convention, Kingston finds the strength to break down barriers of her own. Cheung rightly points out that Kingston opens her memoir by defying her mother’s orders; she “present[s] the prodigal aunt in the first chapter” (Cheung 167). Therefore, the strength Kingston derived from her aunt is evident at first glance in *The Woman Warrior*, she practices the lesson learnt from her aunt and breaks down communication barriers in the first instance of her memoir.

Further, Kingston goes on to confront her guilt in keeping her aunt’s story silent, and she reflects on how she conformed to her culture: “In the twenty years since I heard this story I have not asked for details not said my aunt’s name; I do not know it” (16). Kingston therefore occupies a unique space in *The Woman Warrior*, one in which she plays the role of both the silencer and the silenced. According to Marta Caminero-Santangelo, “the direction of resistance in the postmodern consequently changes from a one-directional struggle [modernist] against the dominant order to a more flexible resistance that is context-specific (and, therefore, contradictory: what is resistant in one context could be seen as complicit in another)”. Therefore, Kingston’s struggle in her

memoir is not linear; it is a complex web of compliance and resistance to a dominant culture, in this case, traditional Chinese culture. However, Kingston breaks free of her self-censorship and not only shares her aunt's story but also crafts a new lesson for herself, which is contrary to what she learnt as a young girl: "I knew that silence had to do with being a Chinese girl" (166). However, after seeing what came of her aunt "[she becomes] afraid of losing her identity, of being erased or unhinged through silence" (Cheung 164). By telling her aunt's story, Kingston paves the way for her own individuality and use of speech to develop. During her development, Kingston begins to feel haunted by her aunt. Kingston has "devote[d] pages of paper to her [aunt]", suggesting that, though her aunt is forever silenced in death, she is still able to communicate with her. The No Name Woman's silence is a type of communication for Kingston, further transforming her from a figure who enforced silence to a catalyst of communication.

Like the No Name Woman, the previous Offred transforms from a figure who reminds Offred to remain silent and compliant into a figure who encourages Offred to find her own voice. Offred's curiosity with the previous handmaid drives her to not only speak up and ask questions about the previous Offred but also to defy the cultural expectations of Gilead. After building a relationship with her Commander and discovering that she is following the footsteps of the previous handmaid, Offred summons the courage to openly ask him questions about the previous Offred:

'What happened to her' I say...

‘She hanged herself,’ he says; thoughtfully, not sadly. ‘That’s why we had the light fixture removed. In your room.’ He pauses. ‘Serena found out,’ he says, as if this explains it. And it does. (235)

Therefore, the silence that Offred subjected herself to after asking Rita about the previous handmaid not longer inhibits her. It is clear that Offred, fearful that her own fate will mirror the previous Offred’s, is interested in breaking communicatory decorum in order to survive. Similarly, the previous Offred inspires Offred to resist Gilead culture as a whole. The message carved by the previous Offred in the handmaid’s room closet; “*Nolite te bastardes carorundorum*”, becomes Offred’s mantra while at her Commander’s household. It is this message<sup>2</sup> that encourages Offred to mentally and physically endure and defy Gileadean expectations. She comes to realize that it is “the silence enjoined on her by her culture” (Danahay 66) that inhibits her the most. Offred communicates with the previous Offred through this Latin mantra and uses it to change her fate, which appeared to be headed toward demise similar to the previous handmaid: “It was a message, and it was in writing, forbidden by that very fact, and it hadn’t been discovered. Except by me, for whom it was intended. It was intended for whoever came next” (65). Therefore, Offred, like Kingston, uses a ghost as inspiration to find her own voice. Like Kingston becomes impressed with her aunt’s deviance, Offred is inspired by the rebellion of the previous handmaid, who wrote down the mantra despite the Gilead rules. Kingston and Offred both reappropriate their predecessor’s stories and use their stories as motivation to rise above silence and persecution.

Both Kingston and Offred overcome their oppression by becoming champions of speech. Inspired by the women that came before them, Kingston and Offred master the

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<sup>2</sup> which Offred discovers translates to “don’t let the bastards grind you down” (235)

art of talk-story, which allows them to share their experiences with an audience. It is through the process of talk-story that each woman finds her voice and is able to break free of the silence that shrouded them within their oppressive cultures.

In *The Woman Warrior*, Kingston finds her own voice through mastering the art of talk-story and speech. Not only is her memoir evidence of her ability and skill in talk-story but her experiences practicing speech, outlined in her memoir, also allow her to break out of silence. According to Linda Morante, “The act of writing—or telling—engenders selfhood. Suggestively, the first and last characters to serve as focal points of the book, the voiceless aunt and the victorious poet, mirror Kingston’s own progress from the silence that is selflessness to the song that is selfhood” (81). It is Kingston’s telling of her story that allows her to discover her identity that, according to Morante, is more akin to the poet than the No Name Woman. It is evident in *The Woman Warrior* that Kingston’s trajectory from silence to song was laden with experiences in practicing speech. One such experience is when Kingston torments the Quiet Girl in the bathroom: “‘Why won’t you talk?’ I started to cry... ‘You don’t see I’m trying to help you out, do you?...I’m doing this for your own good’ (180-181). According to Morante, “Her taunt at another mute schoolgirl...is actually the self-directed warning of a child frightened by a desolate expanse of widening silence” (78). Therefore, in her early experiences of trying to discover her own voice and escape silence, Kingston abuses the Quiet Girl in order to confront her own behaviours and the injustices forced upon her by her culture and family. This sentiment is echoed by Martin Danahay who adds that “Kingston fears silence because it is linked with victimization...Her attempt to make the other girl speak is...an escape from victimization and a turning of the other girl into a victim” (72). However, it

is more apt to suggest that, rather than try to victimize the Quiet Girl, Kingston is trying to overcome the pressures of her own culture; she is talking more to herself than the Quiet Girl, a reason she becomes overcome with emotion during the scene. This is just one example of Kingston's voice lessons, in which she learns how to overcome her own compliance in her culture's paradigm of silence. According to Morante, "She [Kingston] concludes her memoir with the legend of Ts'ai Yen, a female poet who triumphs in song" (78) as well as by examining her new position in society as a woman who has broken free of silence. Kingston occupies a new unique space of writing and song at the end of her memoir: "She [Kingston] now seeks to emulate the poet who sings to foreign music. As the lyrical ending intimates, Maxine has worked the discords of her life into a song" (Cheung 172). Cheung suggests that Kingston, having turned her life into song, is a different person from the young girl tangled in a web of silence and tradition. It is interesting that, in her analysis of *The Woman Warrior*, Cheung clearly identifies between Maxine, the girl and Kingston, the woman. Marjorie J. Lightfoot does the same, "Let us call her youthful persona Maxine, to differentiate the naïve protagonist from the mature narrator who presents both her immature perceptions and her adult views" (56). Thus, Kingston, not Maxine, becomes a champion of talk-story at the end of *The Woman Warrior* and breaks free of the debilitating silence that, as a young girl, threatened her ability to find her identity.

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Offred becomes a champion of speech after she is smuggled out of the Commander's house on 'The Underground Femaleroad.' The Historical Notes explain that Offred recorded her experiences on tapes and hid them to be found in the future. Offred's tapes, her own talk-story, showcase her ability to triumph

over the silence inflicted upon her by Gilead and reconstruct her traumatic story: “There were some thirty tapes in the collection altogether, with varying proportions of music to spoken word. The voice is a woman’s” (374-375). Therefore, Offred, despite the dangers of conveying her story, persevered in recording, making sure “each tape [began] with two or three songs, as camouflage” (374). The effort that Offred went to hide and disguise her tapes suggests that recording her story was as risky as writing it down. The power structure in *The Handmaid’s Tale* restricts women from communication as a whole. In Offred’s case, it is not the pursuit of the written word that is coveted but the pursuit of talk-story and communication; evident in the medium she chose to record her story. Therefore, Offred triumphs at the end of *The Handmaid’s Tale* not only by becoming a champion of speech but also by outsmarting her oppressive culture and ensuring her tapes would reach a future generation.

Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior* and Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* are two texts that chronicle a woman’s trajectory from silence to speech. Both Kingston and Offred use speech to emancipate themselves from oppressive cultures that devalue women. By transforming women of the past from enforcers of silence to role models and being inspired to find their own voices, Kingston and Offred are able to develop into champions of speech. The themes of these two texts are still relevant today, as the speech/silence binary is still a gendered dynamic. Both texts struggle with a female demographic that is strangely silent, suggesting that these two texts are of particular value because the protagonists in them triumph in finding a voice for themselves.

Word Count: 2,997

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