

# Mimicry-a Strategy for the Self-Reconstruction of Maxine Hong Kingston in *The Woman Warrior*

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**Abstract.** As one of the most famous works in Asian American Literature, *The Woman Warrior* has been criticized from many aspects, like from the perspectives of feminism, deconstructionism, postmodernism... This paper tends to analyze it by applying the method of post-colonialism in order to interpret Kingston's "distortion" of Traditional Chinese mythology. Through analysis, the author finds that the critique and defamation of Kingston is actually non-sense. On the contrary, mimicry dissolves the "great narrative" of west mainstream culture and destroys the integrity and consistency of western ideological and narrative strategy. It is rightly this mimicry of Chinese fable that enables Kingston and all the Chinese American to reconstruct themselves while being caught in the dilemma of Chinese and American culture.

## 1. Introduction

Almost all the ethnic American writers blend their own cultural heritages into their works. Among those writers who create a special and loud voice with their diverse traditions, Maxine Hong Kingston, is one of the most famous but the most controversial ethnic American writer. *The Woman Warrior*, as her first famous works all the same receives various critiques from home and broad. "Although I marveled at Kingston's comprehensive intertextuality, I did find her bold rewriting of some Chinese tales to be disturbing", admits Qing-yun Wu (Yan, 1996: p3).

"The myth is not passed on by text; it's mostly passed on by word of mouth and every time you tell a story and every time you hear it, it is different. So there isn't one frozen authentic version; there are many, many authentic versions different from person to person" (Madsen, 2001: p74).

Through her explanation, it is easy for us to notice that Kingston actually does not distort the Chinese history, but helps pass it on through another way. Therefore, it can be said that Kingston's recreation and rewrite of Chinese tales is, in fact, supplements and enriches the meaning of national culture in respect of space and on the other hand, continues and carries it on from the aspect of time.

## 2. Wandering in the Dilemma of Two Cultures

As a distinct ethnic group in American history, Chinese American have been looking for their own identity, position and property in this multiple culture since the moment they stepped on the land of America. Turning away from their local culture they lost the native root gradually, and craving for being accepted by the mainstream culture, but at the same time being rejected. They belong to the group of "Diasporans" in the perspective of postmodernism. Being caught in the dilemma of rejecting and being rejected, Chinese American are badly in need of finding way out. Kingston as one of the delegate of the second generation of Chinese American is caught in this difficult position as well. *The Woman Warrior* is a book with autobiographical color; the "I" is a Chinese American girl who educated in the environment of American but also influenced by her mother- the spokesman of Chinese. Sticking in the middle of two cultures, she tries all her effort to escape from the "mysterious and feudal" China to the "open and enlightened" America. China, according to her, is a country full of ghosts and monsters, in which females instead of having their own rights, are seen as "maggots in the rice" (Kingston, 1989: p46). Aiming at escaping from this ghostly world, she chooses to run to the direction of being accepted by American mainstream society, yet being declined again. As a Chinese American writer, Kingston has no other way but to use her special

identity and the marginal culture to reconstruct an ambivalent textual world: the “Third Space”, in which “all culture meaning is constructed, and there is no original ‘meaning’ or cultural ‘purity’, and no revolutionary development of ideas, history, or culture; instead there is cultural difference” according to Homi Bhabha (Childs and Williams: 1997: p142). In order to find this “Third Space”, Kingston purposely diverts and rewrites Chinese fables. Mimicry on the one hand dissolves the “great narrative” of west mainstream culture and on the other hand, destroys the integrity and consistency of western ideological and narrative strategy. On the basis of this mimicry, dissolution and deconstruction, Kingston reconstructs not her own identity but also that of other Chinese American’s while being caught in the dilemma of Chinese and American culture.

### **3. Mimicry: Not White/ Not Quite**

With the development of post-colonial, there is a growing recognition of the more serious selves -division of the colonized. “Failing to get the ‘white skin’, they have to wear a ‘white mask’ to act as whites, however, it is rightly this separation of (yellow) skin and white mask that causes the alienation of the colonized between colonizer’s language and culture and colonized local culture” (Lu, 2007: p4).

Homi Bhabha’s core concepts, such as ambivalence, mimicry and hybridity, have become touchstones for debates over colonial discourse, anti-colonial resistance and anti-colonial identity. On the basis of the conception of hybridity, the application of mimicry enables Kingston to carry on her search and reconstruction of self-identity, and then helps enlighten other Chinese American to deconstruct and subvert the western hegemonic countries.

Mimicry, according to Bhabha, is actually “a strategy of colonial power/ knowledge emblematic of a desire for and approved, revised other, yet it is ambivalent because it requires a similarity and dissimilarity: a difference that is almost the same, but not quite” (Childs and Williams: 1997: p129-131). The problem of searching for identity, ethnic identity in particular is more urgent since the 20<sup>th</sup> century, which as a result, becomes the key point of the theme of Chinese American writers. Without a fixed and definite identity, Chinese American can not find their roots in this multi-cultural environment and assimilation of western hegemonic culture.

For Bhabha, “nation” revealed in his book “Nation and Nationality” is in its margins as well as its divided discourse of the nation space, which is to say in its hybridity as well as its ambivalence (Childs and Williams: 1997: p138). That is to say nation itself is undetermined; the national culture as a result is not fixed as well. Wandering between two cultures: the American one and that of Chinese, Chinese American writers could not write if only adhere to some definite writing style or skill. Mimicry, this strategy, therefore, helps them solve this problem. It is not the indiscriminately imitation of original culture, and not the attachment of mainstream culture, which is a different voice with endless power. Mimicry repeats colonial authority as a presence that is “partial”, both incomplete and virtual, and so disturbs the power and difference on which that authority is based (Childs and Williams: 1997: p131). It is rightly the mimicry that enables Kingston to find her roots in the “Third Space” of Homi Bhabha.

### **4. Mimicry of Mother’s Stories: *The Woman Warrior***

Whether Chinese American writers have to adopt Chinese tales intact, Kingston gives us her own idea: “we have to do more than record myth... The way I keep the old Chinese myth alive is by telling them in a new American way” (Madsen, 2001: p73). Kingston has to decipher the mother’s fascinating and mysterious stories in order to bridge the two different worlds and therefore to build a harmonious “Third Space”.

Fa Mu Lan in this poem is a legend from ancient China and was originally described in a Chinese poem known as the *Ballad of Mulan*. Substituting for her elderly weak father, she fought for 12 years on the Warfield and merited 12 ranks of rewards, however, she who retired back home at last without demanding any awards.

Fa Mu Lan in the original Chinese version is aiming to celebrate the importance of the ideology of filial duty and patriotism advocated by Confucius. While the Fa Mu Lan here is neither the filial daughter fighting for her father nor the faithful one to the empire, she is an independent female with intense ethnic consciousness, which pushes her to pursue justice and equality especially the equality between man and woman. In *The Woman Warrior*, Kingston mimics and reconstructs the filial and obedient Fa Mu Lan in traditional Chinese story to a rebellious new female on the “American battlefield”. Here, the traditional Chinese thought of “being loyal to the ruler” is displaced by highlighting the individual merits and achievements and protecting one’s own ethnic group.

Through mimicry, it is not hard for us to notice that the purpose of Kingston is to recreate a strong woman warrior so as to deconstruct and subverts the vulnerable and delicate woman stereotype molded by American mainstream culture. The direct defiance against gender injustice and dominated power enables us to see the most important parallel between the swordswoman and Kingston. The mimicry of a female avenger actually helps mediate the anger of Kingston, the woman who is disappointed and depressed by the real life in America. As her alter ego, the swordswoman under her pen assists her to give a serious attack to the American hegemonic and discriminated ideology towards ethnics and female.

This mimicry annoys many Chinese readers and Chinese American writers, to whom, she is the legendary heroine. The blending of the two perfect characters leads to ungainly incongruity; some of them even deem it as a disrespectability and ignorance towards Chinese culture. Yet, it is just the mimicked Fa Mu Lan that decentralizes and overturns the coherence and wholeness of American mainstream culture from its inside. The group of Chinese American is no longer the inferior ethnic, Chinese American themselves, especially female Chinese American are not belong to the vulnerable and humble type any more, they have voiced loudly their own ideas and opinions like the woman warrior in the literature.

## 5. The Song of Harmonious Relationship between East and West

As Connolly points out, “identity is site of multiple disjunctions in need of politicization as well as unities that enable life. The task is to identify those patterns of insistence in a society to idealize its own formation and then to project counter strategies by which to expose multiple points of discrepancy between institutional idealizations and that which they contain or subjugate” (Zhang, 2004: p149).

The problem of longing for self-identity, especially that aroused from the conflict between mother and daughter has long been the theme searching by Chinese American writers. In order to remind their children of the native culture and preserve their cultural heritage, the mother always chooses the way of telling stories or sending them to the Chinese school. Yet, sometimes this way is somehow too severe and unacceptable because of the different cultural background. As the second generation, what they fight for is the independent individual rights, the freedom of a girl in particular. The tragic fate of traditional Chinese female, the mysterious Chinese tradition, and the silent students in American school, all disappointed the daughter or rather we can say Kingston herself. Aiming at rebel against the unequal situation of Chinese females, the daughter “refused to cook” (p47). At school, she tortures a vulnerable silent girl to make her speak.

In the last part of *The Woman Warrior*, with the assistance of Ts’ai Yen, Kingston plays “a song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe” for Chinese American as well as Native American. The images Kingston borrows from the Chinese sources shifts from the legendary warrior to the poetess Ts’ai Yen. Ts’ai Yen under Kingston’s pen is an assimilated fighter “fought desultorily when the fighting was at a distance, and she cut down anyone in her path during the madness of close combat”, she like other barbarian women “gave birth on the sand” (p208).

The story of Ts’ai Yen mimicked by Kingston not only reflects the development of the relationship between mother and daughter from tension to compromise, finally to mutual understanding, but also presents us the interaction between Chinese culture and American culture through the progress of dialogue, negotiation, compromise and hybridity. In the dominated American mainstream culture, the “I” is endeavoring to speak out her own voice, which is different

from the traditional one as well as the one as a part of Native American culture, but a hybridity produced through mutual sympathy and understanding. The gulf between Ts'ai Yen and the barbarians, the barrier between Ts'ai Yen and her son, and the gap between the mother and the daughter are actually the distance between Chinese and American culture. Kingston's new interpretation extends the metaphor of reuniting across national and cultural borders and onto the American soil to address the issue of cultural misunderstanding or misinterpretation of the Eastern and Western cultures and the necessity of mutual understanding.

## 6. Conclusion

From swordswoman Fa Mu Lan to the poetess Ts'ai Yen, Kingston reconstructs various images of woman warrior through fantasizing, retelling and reimagining. The mimicry of Chinese sources and the dialogue between the mother and daughter serves as the process of healing her trauma; clarifying the misunderstanding and misinterpretation, reconstructing the mother-daughter relationship as well as the American and Chinese relationship. Everything she writes down about China is from the point view of an American; everything she describes is not the original one but the one mimicked. By the mimicry, Kingston presents us with a swordswoman to fight against gender discrimination and weaken and deconstruct of American mainstream culture. Through recomposing Ts'ai Yen's poem, Kingston finally finds a way to articulate her voice and bridge the gulf between two cultures.

The critique of Kingston's distortion and misrepresentation of Chinese tales is actually unfair. Through the above analysis, the author finds that it is rightly the mimicry of Chinese sources that helps reconstruct the identity of Chinese American while being caught in the dilemma of Chinese and American culture. It is necessary, therefore, for us to see the special position Kingston stands. As a member of "Diasporans", Kingston wanders back and forth between two cultures to act as a coordinator. Only by separating herself from Mother's world, by negating and subverting that world's presumptive meaning, can Kingston sort out a new interpretation of the Chinese past and American present. The mimicry endows Kingston with the ability to create a special hybrid, the rights to reconstruct the embarrassing identity of Chinese American.

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