WOMAN WARRIOR'S CULTURAL SUITCASE: A FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE

by

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The literature of the '90s must embrace voices that are not often heard in the classical canon – voices of minorities and of women. Though there is still unrest and grumbling about this, for the most part our discipline has cautiously accepted the responsibility. When we are dislodging excellent work to make way for the new, however, we want to choose the best of the new voices. Recently, we introduced Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* into our composition courses, a controversial decision.

There were some excellent reasons. For one, the book itself is excellent. The winner of national and international awards for nonfiction, Hong Kingston has taken autobiography and with fictional techniques, has woven an intensely fierce and disturbing story of growing up female and Chinese in California. As an autobiography, it is the voice of a real expert, you might say, on the subjects of race and gender.

Secondly, its style is distinctly feminine; nonlinear, intuitive, encompassing the whole rather than dividing it. Its portrayal of this woman's unique reality goes beyond the factual or objective autobiography as the author moves in and out of cultural myths and subjective realities the way we move in and out of dreams.

This text obviously broadens our understanding of what it means to be a woman in other countries or a minority woman in this country. But perhaps more important, it shows us how, even in America, a woman's voicelessness can be shaped by her culture. Even in America women can become self-enforcers of a code of silence.

In *The Woman Warrior* we have a young woman fighting to transform her silence into language and transform that language into the action of her own consciously chosen life. Her alternative is passivity, powerlessness and despair. It is not an easy fight, for her suitcase for the journey to maturity has been packed by a powerful mother who had been a doctor, a shaman, a slaveholder in pre-Communist China, a mother who fills her head with all the warnings, shamings, fears and superstitions that the Chinese culture used to control and dominate women.

That culturally enforced dominance is not unique to Chinese-American women. It is the experience of most women—all of us come from a cultural heritage of devalued women. All of us still deal with the devaluation of women's ways of speaking, their subjects and their voices. Research such as Dale Spender's *Women of Ideas and What Men Have Done to Them* shows how difficult it is to break through such self-enforced silence, how rare the woman who dares to interrupt the dominant male voice.

Confrontation, transformation, and release of culturally prescribed silence has long been a central concern of feminist writers. In her essay, "The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action," Audre Lorde says after becoming aware of her mortality, what she regretted most were her silences. Many women, and perhaps especially our polite Minnesota students, fear the breaking of this silence because the transformation of silence is an act of self-revelation, and that is always frightening at first. Lorde, in *Sister Outsider*, speaks to us all, professors and students alike, when she asks: "What are the words you do not yet have? What do you need to say? What are the tyrannies you swallow day by day and attempt to make your own, until you will sicken and die of them, still in silence?"

The young Maxine Hong is in danger of such a silent death. Her mental suitcase has been packed with stories of fear, punishment and inadequacy, stories designed to teach women caution, silence and restraint. "Before we can leave our parents, they stuff our heads like the suitcases they jampack with homemade underwear," she moans.

One of the myths packed in Maxine's suitcase mind is "White Tigers," an ancient myth from the old country in which a girl goes alone to the mountain, where she is trained by an old couple in the wisdom and use of silence, isolation, and meditation. She learns to endure silence, and to survive alone. She takes this learning back to her village, where the crimes against her people are literally carved upon her naked back.

The young Maxine, growing up in a Chinese-American home, has learned well the lessons of silence, of surviving alone on her own mental mountain top. Like the Woman Warrior of the fable, she too has the crimes against her predecessors carved on her back; stories of an aunt so powerless to the persecution of women that she submits to the sexual demands of a man even though she knows that she will be punished and ostracized. A suicide, she remains to haunt Maxine in the symbolic image of a ghost by the well. All her life Maxine hears stories of girls who were married off as servants or sold as slaves, girls valued so little their birth was treated as a sorrow and burden.

Maxine's own mother transfers centuries of acceptance of patriarchal dominance on to her daughter. A woman aggressively outspoken herself, Brave Orchid leaves little room for Maxine to form a separate self through the expression of her own views. In many situations, a woman has two choices, to act the outlaw, or to remain silent. Few mothers want their daughters to brave the consequences of being an outlaw. Maxine's mother teaches fear, submission and self immobilization to protect her daughter.

Maxine's silence is strangling her. She projects her anger and self-loathing out on another more silent girl, beating her up and humiliating her, then falls ill herself with the shame of it. If she does not face her silence and transform it into language, she will die. It is not easy for Maxine to face these twin dragons nesting in her suitcase; low self esteem from the cultural devaluation of women, and inability to speak for herself in the face of her mother's powerful and dominating presence.

But her mother's stories also teach courage. In them, her mother faces down fear in the form of ghosts and superstitions, to become a respected shaman and doctor, at a time when most women were little more than slaves. The mythical woman warrior defeated armies, even giving birth to a baby during battle.

As Maxine Hong unpacks her cultural suitcase, throws out the untrue, the confining, repacks it with her own limitless desires, wishes and strengths, she finds her way. Like many of us, she thinks others must accept everything she is before she can accept herself. Her mother, of course, does not. But Maxine must speak – right or wrong she must speak and hear herself speak, despite any reaction she might get. Eventually, Maxine's anger frees her tongue, and she speaks up for herself loudly. "A Song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe" is heard at last, both in the Chinese home, and with the publication of the splendid autobiography.

After using *The Woman Warrior* as the central focus of a Freshman Composition class, I discovered how freeing it was for the students, both men and women. Rather than alienate them as a "foreign" experience might, it gave them a way to examine an experience only seemingly foreign, and to find in it many reflections of their own invisible cultural shapings. In the safe avenues of literature, they could recognize how many of their own assumptions are formed by unspoken controlling myths behind the cultural milieu of the American midwest.

In *The Woman Warrior* our women students see the dangers, the self crippling, that comes from not speaking up. As they experience Maxine's

final exhilarating freedom, they begin to be aware of the ways they hold themselves back. Their papers become a bit less timid, making the connection between their unexamined cultural suitcases and their own silence. Some make students see the ways their unexamined attitudes toward women contribute to silencing them.

To return again to Audre Lorde's words: "Each of us is here now because in one way or another we share a commitment to language and to the power of language, and to the reclaiming of that language which has been made to work against us. In the transformation of silence into language and action, it is vitally necessary for each one of us to establish or examine her function in that transformation and to recognize her role as vital within that transformation."

Woman Warrior is an excellent place to pursue that commitment.

Works Cited

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