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Feminist Theory and Historical Approach to *The Woman Warrior's* "White Tigers"

The Woman Warrior by Maxine Hong Kingston is the story of finding one's own, personal voice and self. It follows the different stages of Maxine's life specifically, what she has been taught and learned along the way. Kingston's book has managed to create many controversial arguments in recent years. Specifically, it raises questions on the "authentic" ethnic representation of Asian Americans and the representation of gender and gender relations. Looking through a feminist lens and historical background, Kingston rewrites the Chinese American females subjectivity in *The Woman Warrior* by providing evidence on how women were treated in Asian American culture; specifically, in "White Tiger," Kingston focuses on the themes of ethnic values, family, gender, silence, and overpowering masculinity.

Feminist theory is used to point out the inequality seen in different books, films, songs, etc. Philosopher and activist Annette Kolodny explains in her work "Dancing Through the Minefield" that, "Instead of being welcomed onto the train, however, we've been forced to negotiate a minefield. The very energy and diversity of our enterprise have rendered us vulnerable to attack on the ground that we lack both definition and coherence..." (2052). She focuses her argument on the recuperation of lost texts by women of literary merit and equality among male and female written works. Females like Kolodny, have influenced women to speak out about their personal stories through their writing. Specifically, Maxine Kingston's work *The Woman Warrior*, focuses on the author's life growing up as a Chinese-American female. The

novel is split up into five sections: “No Name Woman,” “White Tigers,” “Shaman,” “At the Western Palace,” and “A Song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe.” Each section tells a different story focused on a specific woman warrior in her life, whether it is about a tale, a moral or a memory, we see Maxine learning from each of these women as she grows up. One that stands out the most is “White Tigers,” because of the main woman warrior in the tale that Maxine loves to read – Mu Lan.

In “White Tigers,” Maxine seems very connected to Mu Lan’s character and, in some way, wishes to be as strong and courageous as her. She is a character that Maxine looks up to and uses as a strategy for challenging the structure of gender roles in her society. Mu Lan becomes a female warrior who takes her father's place when he is drafted into battle. There, she fights with all other men and eventually, falls in love and has a child. This is Kingstons way of romanticizing the woman warrior’s story and puts Mu Lan in the position of a wife: “I hid from the battle only once, when I gave birth to our baby. In dark and silver dreams I had seen him falling from the sky, each night closer to the earth, his soul a star” (Kingston 40). Kingston does not necessarily challenge her ethnicities values, like Mu Lan, of having to bring honor to her family, but she shows the strength that women would bring to their families, besides obedience. Furthermore, Mu Lan makes the choice to return to her traditional home life after battle. She says, “Now my public duties are finished...I will stay with you, doing framework and housework, giving you sons” (Kingston 45). She only says giving birth to more sons but not daughters; her role as a warrior does not save Mu Lan from being expected to produce sons and not daughters. Women were shunned for only giving birth to daughters and not sons because daughters were considered useless and unimportant. While women were the ones who were only

meant to produce life, men were considered to be a gift from God and a woman, just another life that will birth more lives.

Looking back on Asian American culture and history, women had minimal rights. In “Asian-American Women: An Understudied Minority” by Lina Fong, who studies Asian American culture and the role of women, she “...describes Asian-American women as needing ‘the armor of warriors’ to survive the past 150 years, in which they have raised families and struggled against racism and exploitation from the earliest days as farm workers, prostitutes, and domestic servants” (92). Kingston writes about the Chinese culture in the book to give her readers a sense of how difficult it was to be an Asian female at the time. She raises the issue of girls being discriminated upon because of the practices that they must learn in Chinese culture that most consider inhumane. Kingston looks up to Mu Lan by creating her own sense of uniqueness and confidence in who she is. While, females were expected to look as perfect as a porcelain doll, the only way to do that was to hurt their bodies, which caused imperfections in the process. As we can see, being a Chinese-American woman was never easy and still isn’t because one misstep and they would be disowned, beaten, and silenced.

Mu Lan is considered to be more than just a character in a fairy tale. Kingston not only shows the importance of this character to young girls but, “...Fa Mu-Lan in ancient China who dressed as a man and lead her male army against the enemies of her people...[help] the spirit of women from Asia from past to present carries on Asian-American women in America” (Fong 108). Mu Lan’s character creates bravery and fearlessness in all women. Kingston tells the story of Fa Mu Lan which is an inspiration for all Asian-American women. Mu Lan to Kingston, was a saving grace because she is familiar with the tale; she learns to reject her feminine expectations and gives an example saying, “I refused to cook. When I had to wash dishes, I would crack one

or two...Even now....I burn the food when I cook. I do not feed people. I let the dirty dishes rot” (Kingston 47). Kingston adding the chapter of “White Tigers,” right after “No Name Woman,” shows a very interesting connection. In patriarchal terms, as Maxine grows up and matures, she seems to step away from the no name woman (her aunt) and accept her as a failure then, she accepts the woman warrior (Fa Mu Lan) as a success; she can’t necessarily criticise any of her Asian-American values but tries to rewrite about the female subject instead.

In Chinese culture, women are told to be silent and never speak unless spoken to. Sworn into this world of everlasting silence, women lose themselves in the male-dominant society. According to Fong, Asians “...tend to encourage the development of the male’s personality and aspirations, while discouraging women...” (95). Due to this value, women fail to break their silence and stand up for themselves which shines a light on the loss of who they really are or want to be. They are afraid that if they speak up and support women in the same situation as the No Name Woman or, in the book, Maxine, they might be falling into the same destiny. In “White Tigers,” Mu Lan combats this by creating her own path, just as Maxine does by following Mu Lan’s story in creating her own version of life and speaking up. Society has silenced not only Chinese-American women, but all women to the point that they no longer support what is right. They encourage what is wrong to scare and teach a moral lesson instead. Kingston agrees that this is intolerable and that is why she told the world this story.

Kingston does an amazing job in telling the stories of her past and rewriting the Asian American females subjectivity in *The Woman Warrior*. Kingston also makes Chinese Americans visible to the American society and shows the importance of the topic at hand. In the end, Kingston admitted that she would not become a wife or a slave, she is intelligent, and she will rid the feminine stereotypes her culture has set in place. She still shows the importance of her own

life in the retelling of the many stories of the No Name Woman and Fa Mu Lan. She made the themes of ethnic values, family, gender relations, silence, and overpowering masculinity very clear throughout the book. With this book, she wishes to make her culture's values clear that how women are treated is unacceptable and barbaric. Her purpose was to change the traditional image of Chinese women and to improve their social and cultural status. She did an amazing job in showing the importance of women's strength and power.

Works Cited

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