

ETHNIC SUBJECTIVITY AND THE TRADITION OF STORY TELLING IN MAXINE HONG KINGSTON'S *THE WOMAN WARRIOR*

Dr. V. Prathiba, Reader and Research Guide, Department of English, University of Calicut, Kerala
Aparna B., Research Scholar, Department of English, University of Calicut, Kerala

Abstract:

The article analyses the tradition of story-telling in an ethnic background to trace the hidden signifiers of subjectivity. The talk-stories of women contribute immensely to the growing up of girls into women subjects. Even against the context of girl children's treatment as inferior beings to boy children, the warrior woman stories inspire the Chinese girls to recognise other possibilities of existence and survival. The article also traces the development of women into 'subjects' possessing clear political stance, as detailed by the French philosopher Alain Badiou. Badiou's elaborate thesis on subjectivity points to the need to be political subjects who can be faithful to the truths of their lives. This far sighted philosopher could propose a socially relevant theory of responsible subjects which did not lose relevance even after 20 years of the publication of his ideas. This article, here, analyses how women in Kingston's memoir are transformed into various kinds of Badiouean subjects depending upon their socio-political interventions.

Keywords: *Ethnicity, story-telling, Alain Badiou, subjectivity, Chinese culture, politics.*

The sound of story is the dominant sound of our lives - Reynolds Price

From visual carvings (hieroglyphics) and oral traditions, storytelling has now reached a stage where it serves multiple purposes. From the ancient concerns like entertainment and moral education, storytelling has travelled to the status of an art form which can be made use of as political statements, social criticisms and a healing therapy in personal lives. Crossing the borders of private and public, stories travel throughout the world, beyond the national boundaries too. There are larger cultural implications in the art of storytelling. 'Culture as storytelling' and 'storytelling as culture' are different perceptions which shows that storytelling is so embedded in the cultural life of a community that it becomes culture itself. Assuming the status of culture is no easy job, because the roots of culture lie in historical narratives. This is a great responsibility towards the human beings as a whole.

In literature as well as in life, story-telling plays the role of a confidante or spiritual guide due to its healing properties. Story telling is impossible without the notion of sharing, and in many literary works, untold stories are personified as dissatisfied individuals seeking to escape from the hearts of the individuals who keep them. This is the symbolic presentation of a literal fact. Stories torment the keeper to share them with someone else, and this sharing is a value most cultures in the past quietly and perhaps unconsciously safeguarded. In many literary and artistic texts, the culture of storytelling assumes the role of authority which executes power through hegemonic dominating strategies and legitimates it through naturalising it. In these same cultures, storytelling inspires resistance and empowers and unites individuals to against the same oppressing power structures.

In most ethnic cultures, storytelling makes its presence felt not as a nostalgic customary act, but as strong political statements and observations. In otherwise deprived of communities, storytelling serves the purpose of alleviating tension and pain and thus becomes a traditional healer. It serves as an excuse to gather together and implicitly communicate ideas, ideologies and common predicaments. There is a

tradition of oral storytelling in all the societies. These stories women tell serve many purposes- to educate, to warn, to inform, to advise, to share, to give vent to feelings and so on.

“You must not tell anyone... what I am about to tell you”- the mystery and the anxiety is integral to the tradition of storytelling. And storytelling is mostly common in women communities. One is reminded of the beginning of Alice Walker's *Colour Purple* where the story of the whole lot of struggles of one woman begins with the similar words. “You better not never tell nobody but God”. And the telling of the stories soothes the sores of the soul in both the novels, though written in different cultural contexts. Vineta Coelho's *The Washer of the Dead* is also about stories-supernatural stories which tell us the miseries of women of all ages and in all places. In Gita Hariharan's *Where Dreams Travel*, the lives of known and unknown women, intelligent and ignorant women are revealed through a 1001 stories in the fashion of the Arabian Nights Stories. The fictional examples apart, storytelling has been a part of all the civilizations in the world.

Occasionally, one is able to find that the stories, instead of inspiring women to become more ambitious and confident and to reduce anxiety and tension, deliberately attempt to warn or remind women of the consequences of their courage and intelligence. Similar are to most of the fairy tales which tell the little girls to be modest, obedient, loving, artful and beautiful so that the prince can enter any time and be enchanted/seduced/lured by these feminine qualities. The stories mothers pass on to their children also are burdened with morals to be followed. For mother- daughter relationships to be effortless and polished, these stories were necessary so that moral values can be transmitted to the next generation derivatively and periphrastically. For feudal, patriarchal, aristocratic values to thrive among changing attitudes and to overcome challenges posed by modern thinking, stories were needed for exemplification. Since young boys and girls detested advices and morals alike, stories were the only ways to convey social morals to their minds. And this was the responsibility of women, customarily.

The stories of the novel *Woman Warrior* are contradictory in nature and altogether meaningful. These stories can only be understood in an ethnic context, as stories carry different sets of meanings in different contexts. The historical and cultural significance of these stories are valuable in analysing the nature of Kingston's autobiographical narrative. The three major stories happen at three distinct historical junctures of Chinese culture. The first story is that of the No-name-woman which happened almost fifty years before, the second that of the *Woman Warrior* Fa-Mu- Lan which is a popular legend, the third is about her own mother *The Brave Orchid*. There are other stories like that of the *Moon Orchid* and the school girl who was afraid to break the silence. Yet these three constitute the major part of the work.

Among these three, the titular name, the warrior woman is perhaps more suitable to the No-name-woman, Kingston's aunt who committed suicide. The moral of the stories are to be reversed in order to do justice to the feminist perspective. The only woman who was courageous enough to be a warrior woman is the woman who defied the rules set by the society for its women. She was a woman who defended her right to be silent even when it cost her life, the woman who did not want approval of the society for her choices or decisions or actions. The fact that she did not even want to explain whether she had a choice or not is evidence enough for her imperishable will. And this can be the reason why her story is remembered decades after her death, though not her name. She is nameless but not completely devoid of identity. She has become legendary in her efforts to assert her being. The rules were never the same for men and women. Not equal, not even justified. Societies everywhere demanded the sacrifice of women for the well-being of the community. Nobody ever thought if it was too much to ask for. There was no question of asking- only ordering. The power structure always ignored the interests of women. If a woman yield to the patriarchy while fighting her own battle, like *Mu Lan*, she will be reprieved and celebrated like a goddess.

If one becomes a goddess or legendary heroine, it becomes impossible for them to abandon the ideals through which the new identity is fabricated (by the society). Thus the women's manoeuvre will stop, and she will remain a statue, an idol of worship incapable of new adventures and new choices. The

one choice she makes in her life becomes her, and she is confined by a static definition.

Story telling has a long history to boast of. Stories have healing and soothing properties. There are many survival narratives of women which help them overcome their otherwise unspeakable experiences. While some consider this as entertainment or sharing, others treat this as an empowering and creative experience. Many critics and feminists already discussed women's storytelling as an episode of bonding and exchange of information. The significance of storytelling as a cultural and historical process in the progressive movement of women cannot be ignored in any society. Yet, one can observe differences in the stories told by men and women in their circles and the mixed circle. The stories differ according to the difference in the perspectives of both men and women and also based on the nature of the community. The written or spoken word alleviates pain and helps assemble together matters of the disparate compartments of the turbulent, disorderly mind.

Gabriela Kilianova, in her research on the difference in the storytelling of men and women in the Slovak community focuses on the major areas of differences. The most prominent difference visible is about the theme of the stories told. While men prefer humorous stories, most women prefer supernatural stories. Men's stories mostly included anecdotes or travel experiences while women's stories were mostly didactic or exotic in nature (99).

In many communities women's role of storytelling was recognised and accepted mainly because of their moral and pedagogic nature. Old women told stories for children, the middle aged women told each other stories of their families; they shared secrets, hid warnings in stories, inspired, and offered alternatives to the problematic situations of the homesteads.

While women told stories to make it easy for women to conform to difficult feudal patriarchal norms, men told stories to propagate the male-power notions of freedom, strength and adventures. Or rather, women's stories were transformed as ways to conform, while a man's survived as modes of entertainment.

In *Woman Warrior*, the talk stories of Kingston's mother Brave Orchid contradicted with each other. This might be an intentional contradiction or an unconscious one. Even though Brave Orchid herself was a warrior, though she wanted her daughter to be independent and strong, the patriarchal values of obedience and conformity were never compromised in these stories.

The first story in Kingston's work is about her own aunt, The No-Name-Woman. The woman's existence is almost completely erased from the minds of the family members due to her adulterous relationship. This story is narrated by Kingston's mother when the daughter starts menstruating. This is a story which warns her to be cautious of the significance of obedience and family structure. The second story is that of the warrior woman Fa Mu Lan, who is a dedicated warrior, leader, daughter, wife and mother. The stories of the failed and forgotten aunt and the successful and legendary warrior are not told accidentally. Both are stories that warn the young girls on their selection of what is right and what is wrong, or rather what is socially approved and what is inadmissible, what are the rules regarding women's lives in society, what are the strengths and limitations of women, how they should make their choices etc.

These stories impose violence and hinder the natural growth of the girls. The most valuable time of the young girls in their growing up stage is restrained by and weighed down with the thoughts of the moral burden of the whole society. Their creativity and physical energy is also stolen by the boundaries set around them by the past generations. The stories are conscious attempts to resume the patriarchal value system through women. This is something impossible to do without the assistance of women, and they are either threatened or conditioned to follow the unwritten norms of feudal and patriarchal ways of life.

The No-Name- Woman could not compromise with her loneliness, her need to be loved, or her need to resist temptation or she couldn't fight coercion. This resulted in punishment against her, though her lover or the male accomplice involved is exempted from the punishment. While Kingston finds out many other reasons behind the 'crime' committed by the 'lustful' aunt, she finds that she might have escaped the

punishment if it were a different, peaceful time in the country. But the times were difficult; people were worried, anxious and even afraid due to the war. This is posed as a possible reason for the outrage against the aunt. This is more vicious and savage than any other explanations to justify the atrocity against a harmless village woman. What happens to women during a war or riot or internal disturbance is quite evident to everybody. Women are treated like animals and the 'society' takes away even the very few rights they used to enjoy. Women are supposed to keep the patriarchy and the society peaceful and prosperous even at the cost of their lives. Women are supposed to make sacrifices for the family even when nobody else does the same or nobody else ever recognises these kind gestures. If they don't do that, if they chose to think about their own selves, the society deteriorates, and such women should be erased from earth and from memories.

The same message is delivered here by the Woman Warrior legend too. The woman warrior is remembered through generations because of her selfless nature and will to sacrifice. She stood for the 'honour' of the family. The No-Name-Woman ruined the honour of the family by responding to her or somebody else's desires, by being disobedient, by being mysterious, by being self-centred. 'Honour' has become a dangerous word for women.

Different critics pose different characters as the warrior in Kingston's novel. Most of them identify Brave Orchid as the woman warrior since she is a brave woman in her struggles to become a doctor and later gives up everything to settle as a housewife in America. She resembles Mu Lan in many ways. All the struggles, all the learning, all the achievements are given up for the welfare of the family. In most of the conventional societies, women are regarded as the custodians of family values and children's future. They are accused for the non-conformist and free spirited children and admired for the compliant and sacrificing ones. Women are the guardians of honour, since this complex and ambiguous concept of 'honour' is what keeps the family upright.

Most of the women's stories have transformed to suit themselves to serve these purposes. In many local women's groups, the stories told are intended to threaten, warn or console women. Or the stories mostly consist of the adventures of heroes. The girls' groups or women's group mostly prefer supernatural stories, many researchers have observed. These stories are relevant in a women's group because of the element of justice involved. In many stories the revengeful woman's ghost violently and brutally punish those who hurt her emotionally or physically. The boundless power, the unquenchable thirst for justice, the capability to live beyond earthly rules, the rejection of boundaries etc. make these supernatural women characters a favourite of women's groups. Even in the present time, the Nagins, Yakshis, and ghosts appear in different forms in different visual media.

In Vineta Coelho's *The Washer of the Dead*, the writer narrates different ghost stories in different parts of the world- they come to avenge the crimes committed against them, to haunt the unjust rulers and sometimes to threaten anybody who commits crimes against women. Every place has a ghost of its own- the story transgresses time and space.

Brave Orchid, the narrator's mother is also a ghost hunter, an exorcist. Literally and metaphorically, she exorcises ghosts from her life. The ghosts who are revengeful, when confronted with her will power and perseverance, fail pathetically. The story of the Moon Orchid which comes last in this novel is a perfect example of what a woman is supposed to do when the husband leaves the wife in one country and leaves for another. Brave Orchid identifies the problem of her sister as possessing only one talk-story- "At the Western Palace". When Moon Orchid becomes mentally disoriented due to her identity crisis after started living in America, she is admitted in an asylum. There she is able to communicate to others and feels comfortable in being understood. Only the insane women can communicate with each other about themselves; only the insane women are not keen on being silent.

Story telling is also appropriated by the prominent ideologies of the times and this art form metamorphoses to suit the needs of the time. The changing patterns and intentions of storytelling have to be

considered when one analyses the ideological significance of the cultural artefacts. When storytelling is part of the historical and cultural record of societies, it becomes political in nature. This politics of storytelling is open to discursive practices of both listeners and critics. Kingston's position with regard to the stories in her life seems quite objective if we closely observe the influence of them on her. As an ethnic woman and as a migrant in USA, these stories give her varying perceptions of the same situation. The gaze of the two identity positions vary according to the cultural peculiarities. As a Chinese-American woman, she contemplates the stories inherited from her mother in an individually distinct light. The contradiction lies in the two aspects of the two cultures which influence her. The first is the respect given to a self-reliant, hardworking and free woman in the western culture and the second is the value given to the sacrificing family woman who commits herself to live inside patriarchal norms.

The subjective position of Kingston can be analysed by her response to the talk stories she is familiar with. Though the stories have multifarious potential to alter the worldview of the listeners, Kingston approaches them from two cultural contexts. The status of women in the two countries can be taken into consideration in interpreting the stories. Stories do not have a life of their own. That Moon Orchid's knows only one story- the story of the Emperor and his Four Wives- is symbolic of one's own need of experiences and education to learn and interpret new stories. This continuous learning and renewal of oneself is the foundation of a woman's subjective existence.

In Badiou's concept, these stories are not the events which lead to the process of the construction of the woman's identity. The event lies elsewhere. Stories are mostly misinterpreted by the social situations specific to the location, and hence cannot be depended on for a comprehensive analysis of their influence on one section of society. The process leading to the subjectivization of the women includes a critical perception of the nature of the stories told, and the capability to adapt oneself to the changing interpretations of the same story.

Brave Orchid is able to do this to a certain extent, but she is not completely transformed through the act of storytelling or through listening to the stories. She is able to leave the ethnic contexts and become part of a foreign land with all its differences. Moon Orchid, only one year younger than her, cannot do this. Even Kingston is confronted with complex ideological problems and identity crisis because of her cultural background.

The eventual occurrence of Kingston's life can be perceived as the moment when she identifies the significance to break the silence and articulate herself. Even her attempt to make another Chinese American girl in her school speak is evidence to this. Finding out the most important moment in the lives of women as they find their own voice is the eventual site of Kingston's work. The No-Name-Woman revels in her silence and she elegantly takes upon herself the consequence of this silence. But Brave Orchid learns how to break this silence, and tries to help her sister Moon Orchid do the same when she goes through the worst moments of rejection, disappointment and disillusionment in her life. But she turns out to be too much rooted in her ethnic identity that she is unable to overcome the hangover of the one talk-story she learnt by heart.

Only Kingston learns to struggle free from the adverse effects of ethnic consciousness and cultural rootedness to be moulded through the fine aspects of another culture where women have a different social status and individual subjectivity. This subjectivity cannot be equated with agency, since Brave Orchid has dismantled the notions of agency replacing subjectivity through the incidents of her life. Only Kingston finds that it's her voice, it's the breaking of silence which matters.

The Chinese tradition guards a mysterious silence. Breaking this silence is difficult, because it meant breaking the tradition and rejecting the roots and being cursed by Gods.

The emigrants confused the gods by diverting their curses, misleading them with crooked streets and false names. They must try to confuse their offspring as well, who, I suppose threaten them in similar ways--always trying to get things straight, always trying to name

the unspeakable. The Chinese I know hide their names; sojourners take new names when their lives change and guard their real names with silence (186).

But they did not reveal these secret traditional rituals to the children. They had to find themselves, just like one has to find one's own way. The Chinese did not even instruct the children on Gods even.

How can Chinese keep any traditions at all? They don't even make you pay attention, slipping in a ceremony and clearing the table before the children notice specialness. The adults get mad, evasive, and shut you up if you ask. You get no warning that you sideways glare for the rest of the day. They hit you if you wave brooms around or drop chop-sticks or drum them. They hit you if you wash your hair on certain days, or tap somebody with a ruler, or step over a brother whether it's during your menses or not. You figure out what you got hit for and don't do it again if you figured correctly (185).

The last talk story mentioned in Kingston's novel is that of Ts'ai Yen, who was forced to live among the barbarians, and who composed a song of anger and agony which was later passed on to her descendants. Here again the author emphasises the fact that a woman is supposed to break her silence just like the legendary Fa Mu Lan who carved the words of revenge on her back. Words mean everything to a woman, and Kingston resort to writing to exorcise the ghosts who haunt her soul. She writes about the pathetic condition of women in ethnic cultures. In many of the celebrated ethnic cultures, women are ignored as worthless, trivial beings far below the status of man and perhaps many other animals too.

There have been many criticisms against Kingston's use of the ethnic life and talk stories which indirectly compare and expose the hypocrisy of the celebrated ethnic cultures. The injustices and contradictions in age old ethnic customs and traditions are often ignored by most modern and post-colonial critics. Kingston recognises the need to remind oneself and others of the role of women in her ethnic culture at different historic junctures. This only strengthens the virtues of the culture to accommodate criticisms open minded.

That Kingston could overcome the complex forcing of an ethnic subjectivity and replace it with a better amalgamated version of both the Chinese and American cultures is the point where one treats her as a Badiouean subject. The moment of recognition of what one really is and the moment when she decides not to be what others assume her to be are the greatest moments of her subjective process.

She decides to follow her heart's truth when it comes to the question of her identity. It is difficult to answer the question whether she prefers an American or a Chinese life. As the second generation Chinese-American, who was born and brought up in America, she does not deny her affinity to the country and its ways. The talk-stories do not inspire in her any desire to go back to China and live there. Instead the stories instil fear. She belongs to a generation of women who value freedom like their life breath- who yearn for and fight for it all through their lives. Kingston fails to "fit in" to the American feminine and she also fails in being a Chinese feminine person. This confuses her in the beginning, but she grows up listening to stories, asking questions and finding answers about her subjective position.

The discrimination she faces in a foreign country due to her ethnic body and behaviours can easily be compromised when she listens to stories which tell her how women are treated in her native place-China. The fear that she might be sold as a slave if she goes back to China haunts her as a child. The fear is symbolic, since China does not follow the slave trade at present. The fear represents the insecurity that girls face in many cultures all over the world.

The legends of the warrior woman prompt her to ponder over the strategic position she should adopt in order to feel proud of her gender. Kingston stopped getting straight A's in her school, she detested the traditional female roles of cooking and washing dishes. She taught herself to feel happy when people yelled "bad girl". She learns the hard way that "Nobody supports me at the expense of his own adventure" and she should find and follow her own path of adventures herself.

Kingston's process of subjectivation gains momentum when she decides to follow the steps of the

warrior woman in her battle. She had to identify her enemy-it was the white American capitalist businessmen who were racist and sexist. She fought tyrants too. Yet the feeling of 'uselessness' was difficult to overcome, as it had deep seated cultural roots. Proving "worthy of eating the food" was a hurdle in the younger days, but she never compromised by being the 'traditional good girl/ virtuous woman'.

Kingston finds that the warrior woman and herself have 'words' in common. Possessing words was revenge enough. This fidelity to the truth of words makes her a subject. The ethics of this truth is revealed in her responses to the Fa Mu Lan myth later in her life too. She cannot accuse the warrior woman for her feminine and sacrificing nature, because being a conservative feminine self is a personal choice of a woman just like the choice to become a warrior woman is. Kingston does not justify or accuse the characters of her mother's talk stories. Instead she chooses elements which suits her nature, learns from the characters and builds her own mental space where she can be comfortably alive and happy as a Chinese American woman. This process of subjectivation does not end here since Kingston's is a continually evolving character, and thus she exceeds the individual realm and reaches a higher one in this work.

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