(Dis)figuration: The Body as Icon in the Writings of Maxine Hong Kingston

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Abstract

The abuse of oppressed bodies within misogynistic patriarchal societies is an important aspect of Maxine Hong Kingston's fiction. This essay addresses the topos of physical disfiguration in her autobiographical works, The Woman Warrior and China Men through analysis of the rhetorical use of the body as a signifying system. Acts of violence committed upon the feminine body work both to punish femininity and also to break the silence imposed upon the feminine body. Woman-hatred, self-loathing, misogyny, are embodied in comprehensible images written on the body and through the power of storytelling are deprived of their power to disable. The breaking of female silence and empowerment through language is acknowledged by Kingston as the most significant feminist issue in The Woman Warrior. Fear and aggression are required for self-assertion: fear of misogynistic abuse and the aggression to claim and celebrate the body. Haunting fears, ghosts, are destroyed by the aggressive embodiment of them in the narrative topos of the body. Distinct from the violence that cripples and disables the feminine self is the violence that works [...]
In the short story, 'In the Penal Colony', Franz Kafka describes an ingenious instrument of execution which despatches its victims by inscribing upon their bodies, with a myriad of sharp needles, the law they have transgressed. Over a period of hours condemned prisoners are tortured to death. This tale could act as 'talk-story' pointing to the significance of bodily mutilation in the work of Maxine Hong Kingston and other American ethnic writers. Granted, the prisoners of whom Maxine Hong Kingston writes generally do not die. Yet these women endure physical torture not for a matter of hours but for a lifetime, in effect serving life sentences. Recall the Woman Warrior's thoughts upon releasing a roomful of pathetic, mutilated creatures from the evil baron's stronghold: these 'cowering, whimpering women [...] blinked weakly at me like pheasants that have been raised in the dark for soft meat. The servants who walked the ladies had abandoned them, and they could not escape on their little bound feet. Some crawled away from me, using their elbows to pull themselves along. These women would not be good for anything'. Kingston's autobiographical works are dedicated to the purpose of discovering a way to live as a useful and worthy woman. But for her, as for the 'slaves and daughters-in-law' liberated in her imagination, the female body represents a crime committed and punishment exacted. Both crime and punishment are inscribed upon the body. The symbolic role of gendered bodies which is at work in Kingston's writings has been described by Leslie Rabine:

Sexed bodies become the visible signs through which a system of hierarchical social roles is enforced by economics, politics, the family, religion, and other institutional constructs so that individuals whose bodies are visibly marked 'female' find themselves forced into oppressive positions.

Of course, the physical marks of ethnic difference complicate the situation of Kingston's women who bear the traces of two kinds of oppression.

Their crime is the crime of difference — sexual and also racial — which is located most explicitly in the body and which sets into play a symbolic vocabulary that permeates Kingston's texts. The whole concept of bodily mutilation is comically explored in Kingston's novel, *Tripmaster Monkey*, where it forms a part of the complex and allusive fictional texture. Wittman Ah Sing, at work in the department store where he sells toys, catches his tie in the gear sprockets and chain of the bike he is trying to set on display. With a customer nagging at his back, 'he cut the tie with the dull scissors on a string tied to the counter. The Steppenwolf gnaws his leg free from the trap of steel, he thought'. Later he refers to his new-style 'castration tie'. But it is through the character of Judy Louis, the boar/bore who accompanies Wittman on a bus ride from San Francisco to Oakland, that the idea of physical embodiment is introduced. Judy is plain, presumptuous, and prying, insisting that Wittman acknowledge their common 'Chineseness' by talking to her. The revulsion Wittman feels about a personality like Judy's quickly takes on a sexual cast as Wittman turns from the issue of Judy's 'homeliness' to speculation about her chances of finding a husband. This unattractive woman, with her complete vocabulary of racial cliches, is transformed before
Wittman's very eyes into the beast she most resembles.

He looked at the girl again, and she seemed blue-black in the dark. He blinked, and saw sitting beside him a blue boar. Yes, glints of light on bluish dagger tusks. Little shining eyes. Not an illusion because the details were very sharp. Straight black bristly eyelashes. A trick of the dark? But it was lasting. (p. 77)

Judy Louis commits the crime of boorishness but this defect of personality is quickly displaced into physical terms and Wittman punishes her for her unpleasantness by transforming her physical features into an accurate representation of her emotional being. Judy is ugly; because of this she is reduced to the sub-human level of 'Pig Woman'. Linguistic puns like this play on bores and boars (to which the narrator explicitly draws our attention) have led many commentators to observe the importance of language in Kingston's fiction. But this aspect of her work embraces a pervasive semiotics of the body as much as it does the verbal or cultural imagination.

The punishment – which fits the crime – is the scourging or mutilation of that body (of evidence). Women in Kingston's fiction are guilty of two kinds of difference: sexual and racial. In an interview with Timothy Pfaff, Kingston recalled that 'sexism rather than racism hurt me'. That both forms of prejudice are central to her writing is evidenced by the significant differences of thematic emphasis in *The Woman Warrior* and *China Men*. Where men sit in judgement of women in the former, American society judges the China Men of the latter book. The male abuse of female bodies within ethnic Chinese culture is mirrored in the abusive treatment of cheap immigrant Chinese labour. *China Men* is linked to the earlier work by the shared theme of bodily mutilation, a theme which is represented in the prefatory fable of transsexuality, 'On Discovery', with which the narrative is introduced. The feminization of Tang Ao in the Land of Women functions as a parable (talk-story) for the fate of the China Men who travelled to the Gold Mountain only to find themselves deprived of their dignity, their humanity, and, often, their lives. But the story also presents an excruciating account of the physical mutilation of women performed in the interests of a cultural image of feminine beauty which serves patriarchal domination. Tang Ao must be made presentable before he can meet the queen; his ears are pierced, his feet are broken and bound, his body hair is plucked, he is powdered and painted, until finally he is fit to serve at the queen's table. Along with his feet, his spirit is broken. The Tang Ao who, when first captured, 'would've winked over his shoulder' at his male companions is forced to wash the bandages that bind his crippled feet. 'He felt embarrassed; the wrappings were like underwear, and they were his'. One of his attendants, an old woman who is to pierce his earlobes, jokingly tells him that the needle is intended for sewing his lips together; it is not, but still Tang Ao is effectively silenced by the ensuing ritual abuse of his body.

Coming to terms with the abuse of oppressed bodies that is a part of misogynistic patriarchal societies is an important aspect of Kingston's fiction. And among the most difficult obstacles to overcome is the need, first, to acknowledge that this abuse exists. Both *China Men* and *The Woman Warrior* begin with narrative representations of betrayal by members of the opposite sex. Tang Ao is captured because he doesn't think of women as his enemies, he's 'not on guard against ladies' (p. 9). Whilst in *The Woman Warrior*, the No Name aunt provides the occasion for the discovery that all men are to be counted among the enemy. Initially, the narrator speculates that her aunt had been raped rather than seduced willingly and that the undisclosed father of her child joined the raid against her family. In a matter of a few paragraphs, however, the narrator builds a comprehensive picture of sexual harassment, violence, and fear, culminating in the statement 'He organized the raid against her' (p. 14).

Even more central to Kingston's work than this vision of a profound and conflictual difference between the sexes is the exploration of the ways in which individuals are led to identify with the interests of the ruling patriarchy. The narrator of *The Woman Warrior* tells how she
experiences conflicting impulses towards resistance and conformity. Thinking about married women, she laments: 'No one supports me; I am not loved enough to be supported. That I am not a burden has to compensate for the sad envy when I look at women loved enough to be supported. Even now China wraps double binds around my feet' (p. 49). She is well aware that the real situation of married women is far from this ideal of support and nurture; her double binds are made up of the nostalgia of longing and the painful reality of physical oppression. For women, the self-destructive allegiance to patriarchal values is most frequently expressed by the mutilation of their own bodies. Self-oppression is perceived by Kingston as operating between or among women as much as it operates through cultural discourses, including language itself. 'There is a Chinese word for the female I – which is 'slave'. Break the women with their own tongues!' (p. 49). The concept of 'woman-hatred', of generalizing a culturally determined self-loathing to include hostility towards all women, is named by Kingston as one of the motives for her writing, through which she has been able to overcome her own woman-hatred.5

Both *China Men* and *The Woman Warrior* introduce the abusively gendered image of femininity early in the narrative. BaBa breaks his protracted periodic silences with misogynistic cursing ('Every day we listened to you swear, "Dog vomit. Your mother's cunt. Your mother's smelly cunt"' (p. 16), and equally misogynistic complaints ('"Eating pastries is eating dirt from women's fingernails and from between their fingers". As if women had webs. Finger jams' (p. I 7)). The motivation for the narrative follows from this:

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What I want from you is for you to tell me that those curses are only common Chinese sayings. That you did not mean to make me sicken at being female.
'Those were only sayings', I want you to say to me, 'I didn't mean you or your mother. I didn't mean your sisters or grandmothers or women in general' (p. 18).
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But self-loathing is the lesson learned from this abusive vocabulary, a discourse which equates with the female body all that is negative. This gendering of negativity is foremost amongst the 'ghosts' embodied and so rendered comprehensible in Kingston's autobiographical writings. The Woman Warrior battles against fat men who sit on naked little girls (p. 34), who quote sayings such as 'Girls are maggots in the rice' (p. 45), and we are told by the narrator that 'when one of my parents or the emigrant villagers said "Feeding girls is feeding cowbirds", I would thrash on the floor and scream so hard I couldn't talk' (p. 48). Maxine is taught that to be bad is synonymous with being female and that femininity is synonymous with deprivation. Not for a girl the celebrations that herald the birth of a boy; not for a woman the education that empowers men. 'Did you have a full-month party for me?', Maxine asks her parents, '"Why not? Because I'm a girl? Is that why not?" "Why didn't you teach me English?" ' (p. 48). Childish outrage at such injustice is transmuted into the narrative exploration of strategies for gaining approval, including the conscious attempt to become a 'bad girl': after all, we are asked, 'Isn't a bad girl almost a boy?' (p. 49).

The criminality involved in being born a woman gives rise to a sense of guilt that is redoubled by the cross-cultural context in which Kingston writes. Within the terms of Chinese culture she is guilty of femininity; in terms of American culture she is guilty of ethnic Otherness. The narrator of *China Men* tells how the dog tags she wore during the Korean War bore the inscription 'O for religion and O for race because neither black nor white. Mine also had O for blood type. Some kids said O was for "Oriental", but I knew it was for "Other" because the Filipinos, the Gypsies, and the Hawaiian boy were Os. Zero was also the name of the Japanese fighter plane so we had better watch our step' (pp. 269-70). O signifies the Other, the different, the odd, or unclassifiable, the enemy both without and within. The protagonist of *The Woman Warrior* finds that this is precisely her difficulty living as a Chinese American; her subjectivity is precariously situated on the margin of both mainstream American society and emigrant Chinese culture. She is, simultaneously, inside and outside the cultures of her parents and peers. In both
cases she commits a crime against patriarchy; as an ethnic woman she is condemned as doubly Other. The misogynistic aspects of this double Otherness are clearly defined by the body which makes visible the signs of both ethnicity and femininity. In a discussion of the reception of her work Kingston explains how important is physical, bodily, image to the establishment of a public identity. 'Apparently many Caucasians in America do not know that a person born in the USA is automatically American, no matter how he or she may look.' It is within the context of this ignorance that Maxine seeks, in The Woman Warrior, to make herself conform to public definitions of 'American-feminine', only to find that such compromises increase her susceptibility to racial and sexual oppression. She cultivates a soft, almost imperceptible, voice – 'Normal Chinese women's voices are strong and bossy. We American-Chinese girls had to whisper to make ourselves American-feminine. [...] We invented an American-feminine speaking personality' (p. 155) – but finds that when she has to use it to assert her own opinions, as when she refuses to type invitations to a banquet to be held at a restaurant chosen by her boss because it was being picketed by CORE and the NAACP, her voice becomes a squeak, an unreliable whisper (p. 50). This minimal attempt at self assertion is easily ignored by her boss, who fires her on the spot. Only by accepting her ethnicity and her femininity can Maxine find release from this double bind. And this means accepting her body as the icon signifying her difference.

A sense of ethnic identity, born of common physical characteristics, is evoked in Kingston's review of Arnold Genthe's turn-of-the-century photographs of San Francisco's Chinatown. Kingston recalls how, as a child, she first saw these images from a past that had, until then, seemed almost mythical.

The older people were very wrinkled, laugh wrinkles and work wrinkles. The way their eyelids folded and their noses grew, the way their faces showed the hardships and dignity and humor – I felt connected to them, as if their faces gave me my face, as if I understood very clearly where my face came from. I felt enlarged. [...] As I look at Genthe's pictures now, essentially I feel the same way I did when a child, but I also see more particularly because I known more of our history.  

Kingston acknowledges that Genthe photographed a Chinatown that no longer exists and never really did exist except in Genthe's culturally determined sight. These photographs are historical artefacts and yet they express a history which Kingston seeks to claim not only as a Chinese American but as a writer in the American tradition. And this means giving imaginative life and embodiment to figures such as Genthe's from the past. Maxine Hong Kingston has protested loudly against the description of her books as mysterious, Oriental, inscrutable, and exotic: 'I am an American writer, who, like other American writers, wants to write the great American novel. The Woman Warrior is an American book. Yet many reviewers do not see the American-ness of it, nor the fact of my own American-ness.'

Elsewhere, she laments the expectation that her writing should be representative of her race and describes ethnically representative writing as 'tourist manuals or chamber of commerce public relations whitewash'. Like all American writers Kingston writes out of a post-colonial condition, articulating the dual consciousness that emerges from the emigration experience, and yet representing a desire for reconciliation, rather than assimilation, between these two cultural heritages. Kingston describes herself, in the interview with Arturo Islas, as neither Chinese nor American but as west Coast Chinese American, a designation hard won after years of struggle and alienation.

It is this post-colonial context that has given such prominence to the question of the respective importance of gender and ethnic identities in Kingston's writing. Among criticisms of her work is the accusation that Kingston has sold out her people by misrepresenting Chinese culture in
order to make it accessible to a popular audience. Such attacks have been made by male critics, such as Jeffrey Paul Chan and Benjamin R. Tong, and are based on the claim that Kingston distorts a common experience of Chinese-American cultural reality in favour of her representation of unique, subjective experience. Sau-Ling Cynthia Wong, in a very sensible essay on *The Woman Warrior*, argues that these criticisms are symptomatic of a condition which applies in general to ethnic writers who confront an imperative to produce a didactic style of fiction, 'free of useless fantasy which diverts attention from the sordid facts of oppression in American society'. Wong goes on to show how conflicting demands for self-expression as against the kind of social responsibility Kingston is accused of neglecting are explored in the thematic substance of *The Woman Warrior*. But these twin themes also appear in the rhetoric of the text, particularly in the symbolism of, and associated with, the body.

Maxine Hong Kingston's autobiographical works represent a number of responses to the practice of physical disfiguration. Taken together, *The Woman Warrior* and *China Men* represent generational change, depicting shifts in the sexual attitudes of Maxine's grandmother, aunts, sisters and, of course, herself. The two texts also demonstrate that Chinese society is neither static nor homogenous. Kingston acknowledges that she does describe a very specific Chinese peasant culture and insists upon the distinctions that separate individuals from geographically and culturally disparate regions. We are told how, during his sojourn at the Sandalwood Mountains, Bak Goong 'met all manner of men, broad faced and sharp faced Han Men, tall dark ones, white ones, little ones like the Japanese. One group spoke the language so queerly that he laughed out loud' (p. 95). And later the narrator observes of the Hawai'ian China Men, 'Everybody thought that his way of doing things was the way all Chinese were supposed to do them' (p. 103). To read the two novels in conjunction seems not to violate what is unique to each but to use each as a widening of context. In an interview Kingston describes them as constituting 'one big book', and goes on to explain: 'I was writing them more or less simultaneously. The final chapter in "China Men" began as a short story that I was working on before I even started "The Woman Warrior".'

The laws of 'Necessity' and 'Extravagance' documented by Sau-Ling Cynthia Wong certainly operate in both books and are related to abusive sexual attitudes in the same ways. The willing submission to bodily mutilation signifies the acceptance of a conventionally structured lifestyle, with personal identity largely inscribed by the conservative cultural forces of community and tradition. Brave Orchid disciplines her body into acceptable images and urges the same discipline upon her daughters. Painfully she removes stray hairs from her forehead using a depilatory string and does the same to Maxine, who confesses: 'I used to believe that the expression "caught by the short hairs" meant a captive held with a depilatory string. It especially hurt at the temples, but my mother said we were lucky we didn't have to have our feet bound when we were seven' (p. 16). On the other hand, the impulse towards self expression and the bodily representation of a distinct and private personal identity is very differently and often violently treated. The No Name aunt, for instance, is punished by the villagers 'for acting as if she could have a private life, secret and apart from them' (p. 19). The concept of tradition is frequently represented by symbolism centred upon the body, like the image of bound female feet; departures from the cultural norm are also represented using a physical vocabulary, as when Fa Mu Lan disguises her body as masculine to wreak vengeance upon the enemies of her people. Maxine tries out for herself these and other female incarnations, trying to find a way to negotiate the cross-cultural demands placed upon her.

The character of Ah Po, Maxine's grandmother, is the oldest historical figure explored in any depth in the two autobiographical works and she tells us more about Maxine's father, BaBa, and the culture in which he was raised, than she does about herself. Yet Ah Po also represents an image of feminine self-oppression. Ah Po is to be counted among the more misogynistic of her contemporaries; certainly she is more misogynistic than her husband, having assimilated completely the anti-feminine assumptions of her society. It is Ah Goong who longs for a baby girl so much that he swaps his youngest son for a neighbour's daughter and is so taken with the bargain he has made
that he does not stop to think that he could have bought the girl if only he had asked. The
neighbours are astounded by what they see as Ah Goong's stupidity: 'They would have had to give
her away eventually anyhow. And here was this insane man who did not know the value of what he
had' (pp. 22-23). But it is not that Ah Goong does not value his sons; rather, he sees the equal value
that girls have; a value increased because he has no daughter. Ah Po, however, is simply outraged
by the substitution of a girl for her son. ' "Dead man", Ah Po raged, "trading a son for a slave.
Idiot"' (p. 24). She is so angry and so eager to trade the babies back that she hobbles, unaided, on
her bound feet to exchange them herself when, we are told, she usually required three maids to
assist her to walk. It is significant that it is a man who betrays the misogynistic code of 'old China'.
Women, it seems, have internalized these abusive values and, when they do direct this anti-feminine
aggression outwards, it is against other females.

When Ah Goong does finally get a daughter of his own, it is the woman known in The
Woman Warrior as the No Name aunt. Where Ah Po represents conventional village culture, her
conventionality symbolized by her bound feet and enforced immobility, the No Name aunt in
Maxine's representation of her violates all the standards of conventional feminine behaviour.
Maxine imagines her aunt carefully tending to her physical image, even though 'a woman who
tended her appearance reaped a reputation for eccentricity' (p. 16) and all respectable married
women fixed their hair in no-nonsense styles. The No Name aunt 'combed individuality into her
bob' (p. 16). The sensual life and sensual enjoyment evoked by this unnecessary preening is
condemned by village society perhaps more than the aunt's illegitimate pregnancy. But in both cases
her body expresses her rejection of village mores which dictate that to be a woman at any time is to
be a waste; to commit adultery is 'extravagance'; to be female and an adulterer, to bring another
child into the village in a time of famine, is the greatest crime of all. Not only the aunt but her entire
family is punished for this transgression and, with no place to go outside the village, she pays for
this transgression with her life.

The manner in which the No Name aunt commits suicide involves the significant use of her
body as a message which completes the narrative of her life. 'She was a spite suicide, drowning
herself in the drinking water. The Chinese are always very frightened of the drowned one, whose
weeping ghost, wet hair hanging and skin bloated, waits silently by the water to pull down a
substitute' (p. 22). Though she may have had no control over the shape of her life, the aunt does
determine the meaning of her life by choosing this kind of death. Her body becomes an icon of the
feminine condition, a mirror, if you like, returning to the villagers an image of the 'Other' whom
they can never quite banish. Her body accuses and condemns the misogynistic code that has
destroyed her but cannot ensure total female conformity to its strictures. No Name Aunt uses her
body to exact revenge and to issue a warning.

The aunt's story is told to Maxine when she reaches puberty, in order to make her mistrust
her new mature femininity and in particular her feminine sexuality. 'Don't let your father know that
I told you. He denies her. Now that you have started to menstruate, what happened to her could
happen to you. Don't humiliate us' (p. 13). The signs of femininity are represented as dangerous and
demanding strict control. Menstruation is seen as a curse, sex as a threat. Only through the figure of
Fa Mu Lan, the Woman Warrior, does Maxine learn that this is not the case; that the physical signs
of female identity are neither disabling nor threatening. Initially she assumes that the bodily control
she is developing will enable her to suspend menstruation and childbirth. But she is told ' "No. You
don't stop shitting and pissing. [...] It's the same with the blood" ' (p. 35). A mature acceptance of
her body, with all of its functions, gives Fa Mu Lan her strength, including the strength to bear a
child and still fight on. She learns that it is denial, of her self, of her body, that is debilitating.

Ironically, the women portrayed by Kingston, with the exception of Ah Po (and the idealized
Woman Warrior), all experience a dislocation between their minds and bodies. Ah Po's
internalization of misogynistic values does seem to afford her an harmonious integration of physical
and subjective experience, despite the bodily discomforts she has to endure. But the two aunts, the
No Name aunt and Moon Orchid, are destroyed by the separation of mind and body. These two figures are related by the concern with the feminine ornamentation of their bodies. Brave Orchid scorns what she sees as her sister's extravagant self-ornamentation, interpreting this as a sign of Moon Orchid's unfitness for survival in the world. 'Brave Orchid, who had been married for almost fifty years, did not wear any rings. They got in the way of all the work. She did not want the gold to wash away in the dishwasher and the laundry water and the field water' (p. 117). Moon Orchid appears to her sister as one of 'the lovely useless type' (p. 118), a phrase which echoes the Woman Warrior's dismissal of the evil baron's crippled concubines as women who 'would not be good for anything'. Although Moon Orchid has not been physically deformed, she is mentally and emotionally crippled as a result of her life of dependence. Once removed from her safe and protected niche in Hong Kong, Moon Orchid has no subjective resources to call upon to assist her in adapting to life in America. And so, in her alienation, she goes mad. But she is not alone. We are told, 'There were many crazy girls and women. [...] Within a few blocks of our house were half a dozen crazy women and girls, all belonging to village society' (pp. 166-67). All experience a dislocation between mind and body, between what they are and what they are told they should be – or not told but assumed to know out of a silence that simply demands consent. The narrator catalogues the kinds of cultural assumptions that are taught with silence and physical violence, ending with the observation that 'if we had to depend on being told, we'd have no religion, no babies, no menstruation (sex, of course, unspeakable), no death' (p. 166).

Brave Orchid, the feminine presence that dominates *The Woman Warrior*, represents a contradictory blend of wordlessness and 'talking story' which sends a confusing message of misogyny mixed with feminine self-determination that baffles her daughter. As Linda Morante comments, 'Brave Orchid embodies the selfhood that she insists woman can never possess'. Brave Orchid ruthlessly disciplines her body and refuses ornamentation yet as she grows older she takes to wearing shawls and granny glasses, 'American fashions' (p. 93). Though she speaks of feminine submissiveness and warns of the danger of femininity, Brave Orchid is contemptuous of her sister's submissive attitude and herself works to achieve a position of respect as a doctor, in the life she lived before joining her husband in America. Of all the women represented by Kingston, it is Brave Orchid who most closely approaches the ideal of the Woman Warrior, though Brave Orchid lacks the self-acceptance and denial of woman-hatred that Fa Mu Lan achieves. It remains for her daughter to triumph over misogyny. Maxine is unsure of the extent of her mother's anti-female prejudice. She has to listen to her mother repeat the village sayings about the worthlessness of girls and we are told that Brave Orchid showed no compunction about purchasing a female slave. 'Throughout childhood my younger sister said, "When I grow up, I want to be a slave", and my parents laughed, encouraging her' (p. 78). Yet Brave Orchid responds scornfully when Maxine confesses her fears that she will be sold as a slave when, and if, the family returns to China. And Maxine remains profoundly uncertain whether her mother, in her professional capacity as midwife, practised female infanticide.

These fears concerning her mother's misogyny and her own status as an ethnic woman are symbolized as the ghosts with which Maxine must come to terms. Ghosts generally signify separation; most obviously this involves their disembodied nature but ghostly separation can represent cultural alienation too. The No Name aunt's baby, symbol of her alienation from village society, is described as a 'little ghost' (p. 21); Moon Orchid's husband, with whom she is reunited after thirty years appears to her 'like one of the ghosts passing the car windows, and she must look like a ghost from China. They had indeed entered the land of ghosts, and they had become ghosts' (p. 139); Maxine perceives herself and her siblings as ghosts 'because we had been born among ghosts, were taught by ghosts, and were ourselves half ghosts. They called us a kind of ghost' (p. 165). The 're-embodiment' of her ghostly self motivates the narrator of *The Woman Warrior*, as Maxine Hong Kingston describes: 'I have discovered that writing does not make ghosts go away. I wanted to record, to find the words for, the "ghosts", which are only visions. They are not concrete;
they are beautiful, and powerful. But they don't have a solidity that we can pass around from one to another. I wanted to give them a substance that goes beyond me'. Both *The Woman Warrior* and *China Men* describe the ritual enticement of a ghost or spirit to the earth where it can be reunited with its body. *China Men* tells of the poet Ch'ü Yuan whose sincerity and incorruptible nature is acknowledged only after he has drowned himself. Realizing and regretting their mistake, the villagers try to call back his spirit to his body by enticing him with 'the pleasures of earth' (p. 253) which are the sensual pleasures of the body and by reciting the discomforts of death. Perhaps this story is a postscript to the fate of the No Name aunt, demonstrating once again that 'there is some hope of forgiveness for boys' (p. 21). There is no communal attempt to appease the ghost of the No Name aunt except for Maxine's embodiment or representation of her life in narrative form. By telling of her fate, liberating her from silence and invisibility, Maxine restores to her aunt a face, body, and a being.

It is Fa Mu Lan, the Woman Warrior, who embodies or symbolizes the appeasement of those psychological needs that haunt the narrator. Fa Mu Lan has two sets of parents – both a physical and a spiritual origin – she possesses the power of androgyny whilst retaining her femininity and, most importantly, she represents the willing submission to physical discipline that does not require the surrender of her freedom of selfhood. The Woman Warrior embodies a positive interpretation of physical mutilation with which to cancel the stories of feminine torture that permeate the narrative. Fa Mu Lan trains her body so that it coincides perfectly with her mind, defeating the alienation of subjective and objective experience that destroy so many of the women in this narrative. For Fa Mu Lan, the body represents the complete fulfilment of her humanity.

A rhetorical connexion between the body and self-expression is sustained throughout *The Woman Warrior* and *China Men*. Bak Goong discovers in the rule of silence when at work in the fields of the Sandalwood Mountains an attack on his selfhood more damaging than the physical abuse he endures. Denied the opportunity for verbal self-expression, he sickens as his body takes on the burden of expressing his profound unhappiness. Fa Mu Lan experiences the most excruciating form of bodily self-expression. Her body is transformed into a text representing the many grievances of her family and community. Physical violence here takes the form of accusation and as vengeance. The Woman Warrior literally embodies the sufferings of her people and her sex. She is at once sacrifice, weapon, and scapegoat; her body a catalogue of accusations and a record of crimes punished.

The rhetorical use of the body as a semiotic system is related to the narrative use of food as a form of self-expression or self-assertion. Food and rituals associated with eating regulate the relationship between what is inside and what is outside the body. For instance, Brave Orchid delivers a baby born without an anus, whose body offers only incorporation without the possibility of expulsion. The child is betrayed by a body that offers no hope of achieving an harmonious relationship with the external environment. And this is the ideal for which the narrative strives: harmony between mind and body, body and the external environment (both physical and cultural). In token of the disharmony that characterizes the relationship between between her feminine subjectivity and a misogynistic environment, Maxine refuses to cook or deliberately burns the food she cooks; she transforms food into a symbol of her refusal to compromise with an environment that demands conformity with conventional gender roles.

The refusal to feed the body, like the determination to silence it, transforms the body into a symbolic message. At issue in Kingston's work is not the symbolic status of the body but the interpretation of the message encoded on it. Maxine experiences great ambivalence about the significance of the cutting of her tongue: did her mother cut her fraenum to silence or to liberate her tongue? 'Sometimes I felt very proud that my mother committed such a powerful act upon me. At other times I was terrified – the first thing my mother did when she saw me was to cut my tongue' (p. 148). The young Maxine is tortured by her inability to break her silence and her equally strong desire for self-expression. It is the older Maxine who is not tongue-tied, who realizes her mother's
promise: 'You'll be able to speak languages that are completely different from one another. You'll be able to pronounce anything' (p. 148).

Invisibility is like silence, and inscription like a breaking of silence. Maxine's silence becomes a response to the confusion of failing to comprehend languages that do not harmonize. As Kingston explains in the interview with Arturo Islas: 'Language is important to our sanity. You have to be able to tell your story, you have to be able to make up stories or you go mad. This is what happens to Moon Orchid. [...] I am hinting that perhaps if she spoke the language, it might have saved her' (p. 17). Maxine resists the misogynistic language of her parents and finds herself rendered mute. The cutting of her fraenum, like the carving of Fa Mu Lan's back, is an act of violence against her body that at once punishes her femininity and breaks the silence that surrounds her. Physical violence, and pain, is the price paid for self-expression.

It is a price worth paying, as Maxine realizes when she comes to know the power of words to manipulate and change reality. We are warned. 'Be careful what you say. It comes true. It comes true. I had to leave home in order to see the world logically, logic the new way of seeing. I learned to think that mysteries are for explanation. [...] Shine floodlights into dark corners: no ghosts' (p. 182). Words can endow the power to speak truthfully and to see accurately the shape or meaning of one's own life. Words are capable of shaping and communicating reality – words, more than anything else, are able to embody realities. Woman-hatred, self-loathing, misogyny, these things can be embodied in comprehensible images and deprived of their power to disable through the capabilities of language. Figures such as the female poet, Ts'ai Yen, who was able to communicate with the barbarians across the lines of cultural (ethnic) difference, and Maxine's theatre-loving grandmother provide her with role models: they are both examples of female power which is exercised through language and narrative. Linguistic embodiment or representation alone is capable of compensation (or even atonement) for bodily difference.

The breaking of female silence and Maxine's empowerment through language is acknowledged by Kingston as the most significant feminist issue in The Woman Warrior. 'The daughter becomes the inheritor of the mother's oral tradition, which subsequently becomes a written tradition'. The reclamation of a feminine narrative tradition is related to Kingston's description of her writing process: the inscription of the non-verbal. 'You go into the unconscious by not writing and then you make it normal consciousness by writing'. Brought into the writing from the unconscious is a double inheritance: what Elise Miller calls 'the aggression required to claim our existence' combined with an awareness of 'the dangers of defining our identity and of celebrating our separateness from others'. The violence against the body described in Kingston's writing serves both aspects of this inheritance. Fear and aggression are required for self-assertion: fear of misogynistic abuse and the aggression to claim and celebrate the body. Haunting fears, ghosts, are destroyed by the aggressive embodiment of them in physical forms. Violence for the self then becomes distinct from that violence which cripples and disables the feminine self.

The significance of Maxine Hong Kingston's work for the popular Western audience she has attracted lies in the fact that the double difference inscribed upon her ethnic women characters underlines and makes clearly visible the structures of patriarchal power that oppress all women. Ethnic experience in Kingston's fiction serves to lay bare the reality of female marginalization and oppression and abuse. Kingston stresses the experience of difference as an essential part of reading in general and of reading her books in particular: 'Because that's what's interesting – the way one person sees the world. It's up to other people to ask themselves whether they think like that or not. And if they don't think like you, that should be very exciting to them'.

Notes


8. Maxine Hong Kingston, 'Cultural Mis-readings', p. 58.


