

THE WARRING VOICES OF THE MOTHER: MAXINE HONG KINGSTON'S TALE OF THE MOTHER-DAUGHTER STORY¹

Ángeles de la Concha

Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia

Post-modern feminist theories of identity have warned against the use of general categories of gender in favour of more complexly structured conceptions in which gender is but one relevant strand among others such as class, ethnicity or race. This paper will explore how ethnic trends as well as those of class and race, though indeed important, are nevertheless secondary to specific gender conflicts too often transmitted through socially constructed mothering practices. Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* shows the ambivalence of this maternal discourse which reveals an uneasy collusion with patriarchy while voicing ways of overcoming it.

The dialectic between feminism and post-modernism has led to a productive and enriching intellectual debate in which certain assumptions that perhaps had been all too readily accepted have undergone thorough scrutiny and reassessment. Particular scrutiny is given to any presumption that may ring of meta-narrative overtones, though it might well be accorded that a phenomenon as universal and pervasive as male dominance must surely be allowed an origin at least as universal and pervasive, for all the undeniable historical and local differences that such a multifaceted phenomenon may show in its manifestations.

In this context, the recurrent dismissal of Nancy Chodorow's theory of mothering precisely on the grounds of its allegedly universalist meta-narrative tones is not surprising. Her key work, *The Reproduction of Mothering* (1978), gave rise to a heated debate, partly covered in the volume *Mothering. Essays in Feminist Theory*, edited by Joyce Trebilcock in 1983. More recently, in 1991, Linda J. Nicholson, Nancy Fraser and some others have taken up again the issue in the volume *Feminism/Postmodernism*, edited by the former. They offer no particularly new insights, insisting rather on the by now familiar charge that she ignores historical and cultural specificities. This seems to me, to say the least, the result of a narrow reading, as of course it is clear enough that her analysis lies within the frame of the nuclear family in a patriarchal social structure and as such it should be kept within the limits of patriarchal societies. To say, as Marion Iris Young did in her contribution to the volume *Mothering* (1983, 138), that her theory aspires to offer an explanation of male domination in *all* societies (emphasis mine) that have hitherto existed, is simply a wilful exaggeration. On the other hand, Elizabeth Abel in her article "Race, Class and Psychoanalysis? Opening Questions" (1990, 184-204) explicitly demonstrates the applicability of object relations psychoanalysis to

present-day middle-class white American women, I wish to offer a reading of Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior. Memoirs of a Girlhood among Ghosts* (1981), a novel that deals with a girl's search for personal identity out of the struggle of identification with and separation from the mother. The book was published in 1976, two years before Chodorow's *The Reproduction of Mothering*. Its author is American born of Chinese origin, her parents both born in China. And though gender, ethnicity and class play their effects on one another in the dialectics between mother and child and the parallel process of constitution of the girl's subjectivity, it is the gender question, very particularly in the mother axis, that looms the largest in the process.

Kingston makes use of Chinese legend and tradition and of autobiographical material, and as such has been perceptively studied by Sidonie Smith who writes:

For Kingston, then, as for the woman autobiographer generally, the hermeneutics of self-representation can never be divorced from cultural representations of woman that delimit the nature of her access to the world and the articulation of her own desire. Nor can interpretation be divorced from her orientation toward the mother, who, as her point of origin, commands the tenuous negotiation of identity and difference in a drama of filiality that reaches through the daughter's subjectivity to her textual self-authoring. (1987, 156)

The fact that she used autobiographical matter, more reputedly 'real' than the stuff of fiction, arose a heated controversy over the book among Chinese American critics, male of course, worried by the "misrepresentation" of Chinese culture and men as sexist (King-Kok Cheung 1990, 238). A case very similar, by the way, as the charge so often brought against African American women writers by their male counterparts.

The novel indeed makes an interesting case of *microhistory* underlining the parallel narrative constructed nature of historical and fictional discourses and their equal authority for telling the truth. At the same time, and equally interestingly, the text shows the power of story-telling, an activity traditionally carried out by mothers and mother-figures, in shaping gender and social behaviour. "Whenever she had to warn us about life, my mother told stories that ran like this one, a story to grow up on" (Kingston 1981, 13), the narrator comments as she in turn tells us, through her remaking of her mother's stories, the story of how she became her own self, separate from her mother, and she herself also a "story-talker", that is a novelist.

The novel is structured along five narratives, encompassing a large time span, vast geographic and cultural distances, and widely different literary genres. History, biography, autobiography, legend and myth mix, underlining the subjective construction of reality and the interplay of the social and the symbolic upon the constitution of human identity.

The first narrative, "No Name Woman", is the biographical story of a "no name" aunt, thus called because of her banishment from history and family memory as punishment for her sexual transgression of the patriarchal code. The narrative sets the tone of the dialectics between the mother and her daughter, who is the narrator. The former appears in the role of transmitter of the patriarchal order and, as such, as guardian of her daughter's sexual activity in order to ensure that the descent line will be faithfully kept. The mother, anchored in the traditions of the old culture, warns her daughter of the dangers of transgression by setting the example of her aunt's tragic destiny, not just dead in her prime, but her ghost forever restlessly wandering condemned to family oblivion. The moral is explicit: "Now that you have started to menstruate, what happened to her could happen to you. Don't humiliate us. You wouldn't like to be forgotten as if you had never been born. The villagers are watchful" (Kingston 1981, 13). Traditional patriarchal elements in a peasant culture gather in the narrative: the economic basis of the family, in which sons are more highly valued because they ensure that parents will be fed in their turn in their old age; women and marriage used as a tie to the land, to ensure that the men forced to migrate will come back; social watching over individual behaviour which shows the connection between family ties and social structure to their mutual benefit.

The narrator's retelling of the story turns biography into autobiography by using the material as personal resistance against identification with her mother's values. In opposition to the mother's bare facts, she tries to provide her aunt with a full story, searching for alternative plots and testing their plausibility against the background of the peasant patriarchal society in which "to be a woman, to have a daughter in starvation time was a waste enough" (Kingston 1981, 14). She imagines her alternately as a helpless victim of rape and as a transgressive woman affected by the same "urge West" that had impelled her brothers to break away with traditional ways with impunity in foreign lands. The narrator's act of defiance, though, is laden with conflicting ambivalence. Only after many years is she able to break the pact of silence exacted by her mother, and by so doing, to break her own complicity with patriarchy. But her transgression is ridden with the fear fuelled by her mother's stories. Her aunt's ghost haunts her as, according to Chinese legend, drowned ghosts wait silently to pull down a substitute.

The second narrative tells another story told by the mother, the legend of Fa Mu Lan, a swordswoman, this time a positive female model impressed on the child's early memory while following the mother about in the house. The narrative voice interestingly differs from the previous one. There is no distance set this time from the mother's tale nor from its morals. Rather, connectedness is emphasised with the flow of the mother's voice merging into the child's dreams: "I couldn't tell where the stories left off and the dreams began, her voice the voice of the heroines in my sleep" (Kingston 1981, 25). The mood suggests a fluidity, a sense of oneness and indifferentiation which recalls the seamless pre-oedipal bliss. Actually the content of the story was forgotten with the loss of that most irretrievable unity whose nature not even oppositions, as irreconcilable as that between growing up a

wife and, hence a slave and becoming a warrior woman, could fissure. Only after "growing up" is the narrator, now a mature woman, able to discern the power of the maternal presence and voice infused into her innermost being by means of their joined chanting the feats of Fa Mu Lan, the woman warrior.

The swordswomen, powerful and invincible, were the alternative provided by myth to women's only path in real life, that of wives and slaves, both concepts interlocked in the Chinese word for the female I. The legend of the swordswomen shares a certain similarity to the myth of the Amazons. The child reflects that women must once have been very dangerous, which connects with the similar fear of women at the source of the active antagonism to female desire, social power and language manifest in the founding texts of Western culture (see Highwater 1990).

The narrative reproduces the conflicting ambivalence of the mother's role within patriarchy. She tells her little daughter she will grow to be but a wife and a slave, and simultaneously she shows her the way out in myth thus creating in the child deeply confusing expectations. The legend of Fa Mu Lan is itself full of ambivalence. The heroine's deeds and victories, for which she had to undergo years of hard training, are carried on out of filial duty. She takes her father's place in battle after he has inscribed in her back, cut deep in the flesh, the oaths and names she has to revenge in his name. Under a man's armour she leads a man's life in man's heroic style. She hides her pregnancy and when the fight is over, having re-established justice and order, she goes back home and kneels at her parents-in-law's feet telling them she will stay with them, doing farmwork and housework, and giving them more sons (Kingston 1981, 47). "The villagers would make a legend of my perfect filiality" are Fa Mu Lan's last words (Kingston 1981, 47).

What lurks under the story of heroic deeds and personal achievement is the heroine's wish to be a son. She delights in the love shown by her parents on her arrival as woman warrior to release them and which is symbolised in their killing a chicken and steaming it whole as when welcoming a son. Being a *female avenger* means really to step out of the hated female identity inscribed in the sayings labelled to girls - "girls are maggots in the rice", "it is more profitable to raise geese than daughters" (Kingston 1981, 45) - which so effectively excluded them not just from individual achievement or any pleasurable prospect, but even from family affection, due to their lack of value.

The mother's story is pregnant with contradictory feelings and values, glaringly revealed in the failure of the daughter's naive efforts to model her behaviour in real life on Fa Mu Lan's androcentric paradigm. The child perceives that, as daughter, she is utterly valueless. She fears that when they go back to China she will be sold unless she does "something big and fine" (Kingston 1981, 47), and feeling that the only possibility of growing in worth lies in being a son she adopts the masculine code of achievement - straight As at school - and of behaviour - refusal of female domestic tasks - to receive in reward scolding instead of approval.

The third narrative has the mother as protagonist not only as "story talker". It is a biographical report of her own life back in China, a tale of courage and intellectual and professional accomplishments. There are elements that suggest a

connection with the legend of Fa Mu Lan, such as the heroine's daring and boldness, her victory over a ghostly monster that terrorises the medical college from which she eventually graduates as a doctor, her keeping her maiden name, Brave Orchid, against the general usage, or her freedom from husband and family. All of them belong to Chinese time and place, the land of stories, the mother's another bright legend of female worth. Interestingly, her legend also shares Fa Mu Lan's end in dutiful domesticity. The mother's life in America, the only reality accessible to the daughter, starts where Fa Mu Lan's story ends, with the return to husband and family life, once her husband, who had migrated years before, calls back for her.

The American life entails for the mother a diminished social status as a laundry worker and farm labourer that undermines in her child's eyes the splendour of youthful triumphs. The girl has no objective standard against which her mother's "talk-story" can be tested. She cannot make a clear difference between history and stories, both narratives mixing, and both alluring and terrifying in their mixture of exotic achievement and lurking menace. Embedded both in the text of the mythical woman warrior and of her own mother wavers an underwritten story of worthless innocent girls and women whose sad fate haunts yet again the daughter's imagination. The selling of girls, a practice to which her mother had contributed by having bought one herself, or the offhand comment about girls given for free in hard times, or killed at birth, which her mother let slip that was so easy, just a matter of turning their little faces to clean ashes (Kingston 1981, 82), an affair carried on by the midwife, her mother's profession in China, or by a relative, have a profoundly disturbing effect on the daughter's mind. The fears are further reinforced and given a measure of actuality by the girl's own masculine relatives and the Chinatown immigrants who reduplicate the ancestral social representation of female lack of value in their popular sayings in which maggots and girls are synonyms, in theatrical performances in which daughters in law are customarily beaten up to the audience's uproarious laughter, or in the rejoicing in the birth of sons while mourning or offering make-believe comfort in the case of daughters.

In the fourth narrative, we are again given a biographical story which counteracts the opening text, the story of the suicidal No Name Aunt. The protagonist is Moon Orchid, another aunt, this time on the mother's side, and one of the many wives that waited patiently and faithfully in China for their husbands to call them back from America. The husband has become a successful doctor in San Francisco where he has a second wife, much younger and better accomplished than the first one, and never asks her back. By implicitly setting her story against that of the No Name Aunt, the narrative sadly mocks the reward to female faithfulness ironically exposing the painful outcome of the illusory nature of female rights and authority, even within the domestic sphere, which is her supposedly allotted domain. Confronted with a reality that shatters the expectations nourished through a whole life, Moon Orchid takes refuge in madness, that all too familiar female strategy against a reality too painful to endure, and dies in a mental asylum.

Kingston's mother appears now to the narrator/daughter as a pathetic

fabricator of destructive fantasies of power, as it is she who has arranged for her sister's coming and who has encouraged her hopes with stories of empresses and of wives' rights within the family. The power the mother had over the child in the emotional realm is now not just undermined by the unwritten scraps in the fissures of the main text, but contradicted at every step by her social powerlessness and her compliance with the father's law. The conflicting process of the girl's identification with and individuation from the mother takes place against this pattern of story-telling in which the mother plays a prevailing role either as story-teller, protagonist or significant actant.

In her analysis of the novel, from the autobiographical viewpoint, Sidonie Smith suggests that the mother "passes on a tale of female castration, a rite of passage analogous to a clitoridectomy, that wounding of the female body in service to the community, performed and thereby perpetuated by the mother" (1987, 168). In the text, the rite of passage may well be symbolised in the cutting of the daughter's tongue, slicing the fraenum. The child does not actually remember her mother doing it, only her telling her about it which sounds to her as ambivalent as her other stories. The girl is alternately proud and terrified at what she considers "a powerful act" (Kingston 1981, 148) but she is haunted by the real motives suggested in the misogynous Chinese sayings. For the first time in the novel the daughter overtly wonders whether her mother had lied to her. Her cracked voice adds misery to the immigrant's diffidence, to that uncertainty at what has to be silenced, suffered by misplaced people in a foreign culture with no clear signposts. Eventually the confusion between secrecy and "talk-story", the anxiety about her female status and the future awaiting her as such, sold as a slave or its equivalent, namely married off to the first available prospect, together with the frightening alliance she perceives between women and madness, and madness and silence, breaks up in a neurotic storm of impotence and rage. In her essay "Mother-Daughter Relationships", Jane Flax suggests that one of the main ways women deal with anger is by repressing it and then turning it against themselves (1980, 35). The girl, driven by nightmares of guilt and fear, first contracts a mysterious illness and then makes herself "unsellable" through the adoption of affected physical disabilities and feigned dumbness.

The fact that mothers see daughters as an extension of themselves, as Chodorow argued, does not mean that they are able to provide them with a satisfactory nurturing experience, trapped as they may be, in their turn, in their own conflicting world of values and gender identity. In fact, as Jane Flax stresses, "the caretaker brings to the relationship ... the whole range of social experience -work, friends, interaction with political and economic institutions, and so on. [Thus] the seemingly abstract and supranational relations of class, race and male dominance enter into the construction of 'individual' human development" (quoted in Abel 1990, 185). In *The Woman Warrior* the mother frequently mentions her falling down in status in America, not realising that the economic conditions are of small significance compared with her contradictory sense of female and thus self value which she has driven into her daughter's subjectivity. While it is true that ethnic

and cultural factors, such as the serious difficulty of mutual decoding of social signs, play an important part in the linguistic misunderstanding between mother and child, it is the expectations of individual and social worth the mother raises through her "talking-story", altogether contradicted by daily encouraging her daughter into patterns of self-esteem and behaviour utterly debasing and defined by men, that account for the latter's anxiety. "Throughout childhood - the narrator recalls- my younger sister said, 'When I grow up, I want to be a slave,' and my parents laughed, encouraging her" (Kingston 1981, 78).

In her critical commentary on Chodorow's theory of mothering, Marion Iris Young accuses her of "ignoring the power of the father in accounting for gender personality", arguing that in her account, the father was "primarily an absence, not a power" (1983, 138). Actually, what Chodorow deplored was precisely this absence of the father which left the whole of the responsibility for childcare in the mother's hands with its conflictive consequences, to which he contributed by providing an idealised father image which was effectively associated with the outward sphere of public and social prestige. This fact, she argued, may lead a girl to idealise her father and men or, conversely, to endow them with sadistic or punitive characteristics. *The Woman Warrior* is a "mother-daughter" story. It covers the preoedipal period of blissful symbiotic relationship with, and the difficult oedipal differentiation from, the mother. The father is only a presence dimly felt in the background. In *China Men* (1981b), Kingston's following novel and a companion volume to the former, it is the men's story that is narrated and consequently the father's role is explored. What is relevant here is the fact of his absence from the family and his distance from the children. The novel opens with memories of childhood in which first the father is mistaken by his own children who run to a stranger and greet him noisily as their *Baba* until they are convinced that he is not their father. The anecdote is narrated in the first person, by the daughter, and whether it tells an actual or a fictional event it is equally significant. Later he is recalled as either muttering obscenities against women and particularly against his wife, the narrator's mother, or as imposing with his presence an unbearable silence which made the children feel punished and invisible. The father's inaccessibility and his way of behaving communicate to the child value-laden views about gender. "What I want from you is for you to tell me that those curses are only common Chinese sayings" - is the painful plea of the narrator, the now adult daughter - "That you did not mean to make me sicken at being female. 'Those were only sayings' I didn't mean you or your mother. I didn't mean your sisters or grandmothers or women in general'" (Kingston 1981b, 18).

What we have here is Chodorow's picture of the man that dominates and denigrates woman. In the article "The Woman Warrior versus The Chinaman Pacific: Must a Chinese American Critic Choose between Feminism and Heroism", the author, King-Kok Cheung, suggested the correlation between "these men's umbrage at racism and their misogynist behaviour" (1990, 240). One can indeed accept the point and still wonder if it was a comparable case of racism that accounted for the similar treatment women got back in China. There is always the

irritant familiar acceptance of the fact that men will vent their frustrations, whatever their origins, on their weaker dependents, namely their children and wives without much questioning the cause of the latter's weakness and dependence.

In *The Woman Warrior* when the legendary heroine Fa Mu Lan had freed the village from the baron's tyranny she came upon a group of women locked in a room who could not escape on their little bound feet. "They blinked weakly at me like pheasants that have been raised in the dark for soft meat" ... "These women would not be good for anything" (Kingston 1981, 46) is the cool remark the mother's mouthpiece is made to say before they are released and left to their luck on the road where "they wandered away like ghosts". Later they are reported to have turned into a band of sword women, female avengers, but the same narrator's voice disengages itself from the possibility of their actual existence, thus keeping them in the remote realm of legend. The brief anecdote shows how women are first weakened and rendered useless, and then dismissed as such. It shows too, sadly enough, the double voiced maternal discourse and the mother's ambiguous stance in the patriarchal structure.

Chodorow's account of the mother-daughter story shows that it is problematic, full of tensions and strain, but that it has a predictable ending: the reproduction of the family as it is constituted in male-dominant societies. *The Woman Warrior*, a cross-cultural instance of the process, ends with the mother, now old, and the daughter, now adult, finally reconciled in the telling of a story. The mother provided the beginning and the daughter the end. But after all the strife and strain on gender issues, the daughter's ending disappointingly reproduces the fate of women in the hands of men. The story is a poetic tale of violence and abduction that ends happily with conciliatory marriage in the name of the father. It recounts the life of a poetess born in the year 175 AD who was captured by a barbarian, was kept prisoner, and bore him two children. Her songs full of sadness and anger soared high in the nights to the tune of the barbarians' reed pipes. After twelve years she was ransomed, returned to her native land and married within her kin "so that her father would have Han descendants" (Kingston 1981, 186). She brought her songs back with her and eventually one was sung to Chinese instruments and thus remained alive until today. The last words of the story are "It translated well". The words are temptingly appropriate to end a paper on the trans-cultural, trans-historical role of women within patriarchy. It is a familiar story, evoking realities cross-culturally easy to translate.

But this ending would be a lie to the possibilities of change enacted in the act of writing. In *Persuasion*, published in 1818, Jane Austen made her heroine Anne Elliot say: "Men have had every advantage of us in telling their own story ... the pen has been in their hands" (1977, 237). Today the situation is quite other. Women hold the pen firmly and tell their own stories. And by telling and listening to them they are able to expose and resist imposed gendered role identities. In *The Woman Warrior*, after learning the sad ending of Moon Orchid's story, the girls decided that they would never let men be unfaithful to them and, naively but shrewdly, "made up their minds to major in science or mathematics" (Kingston

1981, 144). Of course access to the public sphere, formerly the father's domain has proved a first and important step, though by no means a definite one, as the lives of the women who have entered it are strewn with specific gender difficulties that add to the inevitable *thousand natural shocks that flesh is heir to*. It is true that consideration of an equal share of child-rearing activity with all the social changes it implies still borders on utopia, but history, legend and myth are full of stories that tell us of the power of utopia in altering the course of human lives.

ENDNOTES

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