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The Intersection of Multiculturalism and Feminism in Kingston's "No Name Woman"

Claire E. Porter

Maxine Hong Kingston has been lauded as “the most widely taught living American author on college campuses” (Moyers), and her work “No Name Woman” is part of the literary canon for many universities that strive to promote diversity by teaching multicultural literature. However, this work has also received substantial literary criticism from Chinese American scholars for catering to a predominately white, first-world, feminist audience and not accurately depicting Chinese culture and values. In “An Open Letter,” Kathryn Fong explains that Kingston’s *Woman Warrior* has too often been taken as an accurate representation of Chinese patriarchal society, rather than an autobiography of a Chinese American woman’s experience growing up in America. She states, “the praises from white reviewers have given excessive weight and ‘legitimacy’ to your story as the ‘true representation’—*the history*—of Chinese and Chinese Americans” (73). It is tempting to read this work solely through an American feminist lens, which can lead to a sense of cultural superiority—because after all, don’t American women have substantially more rights when compared to women in this Chinese culture? This perspective contributes to Orientalism, the negative stereotyping of Chinese culture from a western colonial perspective. Kingston’s work must be evaluated with an understanding of the political and cultural complexity of Chinese society at the time in order to have an informed and critical feminist perspective of the tragedy of the “no-name woman.”

“No Name Woman” begins with almost a dozen “hurry up weddings” and a mass exodus to the coast of the American Pacific. What Kingston does not explain, however, is the reason *why* so many men are leaving China, and why they are unable to bring their wives. The answer to these two questions is rooted in the traditions of colonialism from both Britain and the United States. The combination of the two Opium Wars with Britain, the substantial losses of territory and trade leverage enforced by the Treaty of Nanjing, and other unfair trade treaties with Japan forced the Chinese government into bankruptcy. This financial stress increased taxes on the Chinese people to an unbearable degree, forcing them to immigrate to the

United States in order to find lucrative employment.

However, American immigration laws would not allow Chinese workers to bring their wives and children along with them, effectively limiting Chinese settlement in America and exploiting the Chinese for temporary labor. (Chan 7). When all of these factors are considered, it is more understandable why the villagers reacted so violently towards Kingston's aunt: a combination of desperation, lack of resources, and loss of control may have prompted a disproportionate response to the aunt's act of adultery.

As Kingston points out, adultery was viewed as extravagance, a luxury that may have exacerbated an already tense situation. Yuan Shen supports this position in her article, "Cultural Politics and Chinese-American Female Subjectivity" explaining, "the villagers' attack upon the family could be construed as a symptom of the restlessness of a feudal and colonial society which would readily direct its own energy of confusion and frustration toward anything accessible, rather than as a premeditated moment of Chinese patriarchal practice or a ritualistic pattern practiced at the village level in China," (209).

Kingston's description and analysis of the villagers may misrepresent all the cultural and political factors that would have contributed to this event, and lead to unjustified and uneducated opinions on Chinese peasants as both inherently sexist and "mischievous, inhumane, and irrational" (208). One of the goals of multicultural education is to dispel the inaccurate stereotypes that surround minorities and the cultures they originate from, and considering "No Name Woman" on its own may do more harm than good in this respect.

Jennie Wang points out another possible problem with the liberties Kingston takes with her description of the "no-name woman" which is rooted in Chinese religious and cultural beliefs about sexual intimacy. She states that "[Kingston's] cultural conceptions, including those of gender construction and gender relation, are American constructs" (8). To elaborate on Wang's criticism, American culture is strongly influenced by Christian values, which state that any sexual intimacy outside of marriage is sinful.

While the Confucian and Buddhist traditions assert that sexuality should be controlled by both parties in some situations (27), it provides no basis for how Kingston imagines her aunt as some man's "secret evil" or that he would possibly organize a raid against her and her family (Kingston 386). In fact, much Chinese classical literature suggests that in such situations, both the man and woman would bear equal shame for their acts of infidelity, and would sometimes even commit suicide together (Wang 27). As both Wang and Kingston herself state, the character and story of the "no-name woman" are strongly influenced by the American Puritan narrative, *The Scarlet Letter* (28-29). With this in mind, it is easy to see how Kingston's literary

imagination may be disproportionately influenced by American thoughts and values.

While Kingston probably did not intend to misconstrue Chinese gender roles and gender relation, students studying “No Name Woman” from an American feminist perspective may draw uninformed opinions about the way that Chinese culture functioned at this time. While ancient Chinese civilization definitely included patriarchal structure (as seen in the practice of foot binding and female infanticide), the perspective of the reader may change when this story is contextualized within the religious and cultural values of China during this time. Once one considers traditional literature and its reflection on Chinese beliefs surrounding sexual intimacy, this story can be understood as the misogynistic experience of one village rather than the norm of an entire country.

While Kingston’s work addresses important themes of American sexism and racism and is a beautifully written mix of autobiography and fiction, it is not the all-encompassing experience of the Chinese-American community. Kathryn Fong expresses the frustration many Chinese-Americans feel when reading *Woman Warrior*: “Since there are so few works by Chinese Americans being published— works that could present a variety of experiences— the definitions presented by you [Maxine Kingston]...become the only recognizable ones” (Fong 72). Perhaps one way to accomplish this is by presenting “No Name Woman” in comparison to other works of Chinese literature. In order to prevent American ethnocentrism and a misunderstanding of the complexities of the Chinese culture, readers must learn to separate “what is Chinese tradition and what is the movies” (Kingston 385) by critically evaluating literature and contextualizing it within a broader scope of politics, history, and culture.

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