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THE WOMAN WHO LIVES IN WHISPERS

Abigail Hoehn

The No Name Woman is not spoken about in detail, but she lingers through history as a ghost story, used as a precautionary tale to a child. The author, Maxine Hong Kingston, is told the bare bones of her aunt's story by her mother after she has started to menstruate. Most of the text is the author's imagination of what the precursor to her aunt's death might have been. This is especially notable when one considers how Kingston, a first-generation Chinese-American, is trying to understand the ghosts of Chinese culture around her. Kingston has no choice but to imagine her aunt's story because no one was allowed to ask about the aunt's story before her home was desecrated due to the judgment of others. Throughout the text, a prominent and recurring theme is how the beliefs of society perpetuated by the village affected the No Name Woman's life.

Within the village community, the opinions of the more powerful members conformed with the collective and dictated one's treatment. The author stated that when her parents talked about home, they discussed an outcast table where "the powerful older people made wrongdoers eat alone" (Kingston 386). When considering this through the lens of the prominent patriarchy ingrained in power structures, it shows how the men allowed the No Name Woman to become a "ghost" when she was perceived to have ruined the harmony of the village. Specifically, the men in the No Name Woman's family were able to cut her out of the family history completely after believing she had disgraced them. In the family's community, women were viewed as reliant on men, which was especially prevalent during a time in which food was hard to come by. Ernest Ni, author of *The Family in China* states that:

Prior to that time, women, for example, were generally regarded as altogether dependent. As was expressed in an old saying, 'Before marriage, she is dependent on her father; after marriage, she is dependent on her husband; when her husband dies, she is dependent on her son.' This conception of women had been prevalent probably since the beginning of China's history. (315)

Some of the men had left the village to go to the United States for an opportunity to provide for their families. When the traditional patriarchy within the village felt the No Name Woman had ruined the balance of the group, her fate was intentionally orchestrated.

A recurring idea throughout the author's musings was the pressure of doing what was right for the village, and how those ideals affected the No

Name Woman. Necessity was a large part of the village's culture, as it is a trait shown through the mother who was "powered by Necessity, a river-bank that guides her life" (Kingston 385). Therefore, the aunt carrying a far-from-necessary child during a time of starvation, upsetting the balance of the village, was a great sin. Especially since her husband had been dead for some time before she got pregnant. During one of the author's imaginings of the No Name Woman's story, the villagers broke many items within the house: The round moon cakes and round doorways, the round tables of graduated sizes that fit one roundness inside another, round windows and rice bowls - these talismans had lost their power to warn this family of the law: a family must be whole, faithfully keeping the descent line by having sons to feed the old and the dead, who in turn look after the family, (391).

Their strong collective opinions were equated to the law, and they showed her the physical manifestation of what they believed to be a broken community. To them, a whole community was balanced and depended on one another. The No Name Woman broke this concept, so when the villagers raided the house, they broke the circular symbols of harmony. Even though the villagers who participated in the raid wore masks, the family still knew that these people were their friends. This connects to the same concept of harmony between each person. The villagers destroyed the family's rice fields, house, livestock, and belongings all as retribution for the aunt getting pregnant. This would allow the balance and friendly comradeship to persevere between each person within the village after the unacknowledged No Name Woman's death.

The importance of the villagers' feelings toward one another is shown with foreshadowing and language use during the ransacking of the No Name Woman's house. During the attack, the mother recalls their words, "'Pig.' 'Ghost.' 'Pig.' they sobbed and scolded while they ruined our house" (Kingston 384). Essentially, these words represent the beliefs of the people, and both of these ideas played a part in the fate of the author's aunt. The villagers call her a pig, and the woman gives birth in a pigsty (Kingston 384). She is called a ghost, and all that remains of the No Name Woman is the symbolic ghost that haunts the author and her family. The author's word choice during the section in which the aunt is giving birth also reflects on how the villagers saw the No Name Woman. The passage said, "her body and her complexity began to disappear. She was one of the stars, a bright dot in blackness, without home, without a companion, in eternal cold and silence" (Kingston 392). As the No Name Woman is giving birth, the author is not focusing on her physical body, but the space surrounding her, which represents how she was no longer seen as someone fit to remain with others in the community. She was a spirit even before her death. This concept could branch into why the No Name Woman chose to commit suicide inside of the families' drinking well (Kingston 385), as then she would be acknowledged

and cause a final impact on the world. Referring to the No Name Woman as a ghost also represents how she later lingers and has not yet completely disappeared. She is instead spoken about in hushed whispers as a precautionary tale to young girls as they begin their journey into womanhood.

Within Chinese culture, the sentiment from life that surrounded your figure persisted even after death. Familial relations with ancestors are an important aspect of Chinese culture. According to Anning Hu, author of *Ancestor Worship in Contemporary China: An Empirical Investigation*: “The fundamental cosmology that underpins ancestor worship is the perpetuation of family line that is believed to be unbroken by death. The deceased family members, or ancestors, thus keep a strong tie with living family members, and they are highly respected by descendants due to their seniority and supernatural power of blessing” (171).

Therefore, the family of the No Name Woman deliberately removing her from their history would affect her treatment in the afterlife. Kingston comments upon her aunt’s ghost as someone who will be continually hungry in the afterlife, begging from others with legitimate lines. This shows how the culture supported those who were viewed as honorable in life, while those who weren’t disappeared in the minds of future generations.

Throughout the story, the theme of perpetuating societal standards by the village was shown to continually impact the No Name Woman’s life. This was in accordance with historical ideas of China and what a first-generation immigrant might think of it as she is trying to discover her roots. The ideals of the people surrounding the No Name Woman are what ultimately lead to her suicide, and within Chinese culture, the quality of her afterlife as well.

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