
Reinforced And Questioned Gender Stereotypes In The Woman Warrior

For much of history, men have predominantly controlled societies. In recent years many people have attempted to ameliorate this imbalance in power. Nevertheless, many cultures kept these misogynistic traditions through generations. *The Woman Warrior*, by Maxine Hong Kingston, is a five-part memoir narrated by Kingston. Throughout the memoir, Kingston interweaves her own experiences with talk-stories told by her mother. In *The Woman Warrior*, Maxine Hong Kingston explores traditional gender roles in her life. Kingston does so by employing the use of story-telling to both reinforce and question stereotypical gender roles within traditional Chinese culture.

Throughout *The Woman Warrior*, Kingston's mother uses story-telling to enforce gender stereotypes built by traditional Chinese culture. During the first chapter of *The Woman Warrior*, Kingston's mother reinforces traditional Chinese gender norms through the story of the No Name Woman. The No Name Woman was one of Kingston's aunts who killed herself and her child after being tormented by the villagers for supposedly committing adultery; however, it was never explicitly told whether or not adultery had occurred. The No Name Woman is the first example the reader sees in Kingston's memoir of the inequities bestowed upon women. "To be a woman, to have a daughter in starvation time was a waste enough." (Kingston 6). Kingston introduces the idea, alluded to by her mother in the story of The No Name Woman, that women are of less value than men in Chinese culture. This concept of disparaging the women and girls in China is exemplified by the selling of daughters on the side of a Chinese street; a vivid picture told through one of Kingston's mother's talk-stories. In chapter three, Kingston's mother tells of subservient girls eagerly being sold by their parents or professional sellers. "Among the sellers with their ropes, cages, and water tanks were the sellers of little girls." (Kingston 79). Within this talk-story, Kingston's mother uses the juxtaposition of inanimate objects with the young unwanted girls being sold. The juxtaposition further shows the inequities bestowed upon girls and supports the cultural norm. Although Kingston's mother is one of the only feminist models Kingston has to look up to, Kingston's mother still allows herself to be indoctrinated in a predominantly patriarchal Chinese society.

Contrariwise, Kingston challenges gender roles through stories both she and her mother tell. Kingston uses a story similar to the legend of Fa Mulan in order to represent herself as a warrior fighting against tyrannies and injustices in China. In her story of Fa Mulan, Kingston implements role reversals to challenge stereotypical gender roles. "Then I gave my husband the baby and told him to take it to his family, and I gave him all the money we had taken on raids to take to my family." (Kingston 40-41). The role reversal in Kingston's story of Fa Mulan counters stereotypical parental roles, associated with gender. Traditionally, parental roles are identified as women caring for the kids while men go off to work. These gender roles were challenged through Kingston's fictitious story of becoming a warrior as Kingston becomes the provider and head of the family. Kingston's mother further pushes against the traditional gender customs in her story of medical school. Education for women during the time in which Kingston's mother went to school was rare. Kingston's mother not only broke traditions by attending school but additionally posed as a brave woman for the other scholars in her interaction with a ghost. "I do not give in,' she said. 'There is no pain you can inflict that I cannot endure.'" (Kingston 70).

Kingston's mother poses as a strong, resilient woman when fighting the ghost. This resiliency and strength demonstrate Kingston's mother's ability to break the mold for traditional women in Chinese culture. Through this story, Kingston's mother is able to share with Kingston that women can be both strong and powerful within Chinese culture.

Kingston uses her own stories to support stereotypical gender roles. During the second chapter of the novel Kingston tells the story of her fantasy of fighting corruption and tyranny in China. While at face value this story seems to be one which supports feminism, after further analysis this story can be seen as one of self-loathing. Kingston is envious of those similar to Fa Mulan and self-deprecates herself, saying she is not loved enough to be supported. (Kingston 48). Moreover, Kingston follows stereotypical gender roles even when fantasizing about the story of Fa Mulan. "Now my public duties are finished... I will stay with you, doing farmwork and housework, and giving you more sons." (Kingston 45). While the story of Fa Mulan was one that promoted feminism, at the end of the story Kingston still must return to following the gender norms set by a traditional Chinese society. Through the ending of Kingston's story the reader can witness how even when living her fantasy, Kingston still results in going back to traditional gender roles that have been instilled into her by society. Later in the memoir, Kingston uses a tangible story to display paradoxical roles which women must abide by in Chinese culture. "The other Chinese girls did not talk either, so I knew the silence had to do with being a Chinese girl." (Kingston 166). Through Kingston's story of her silence during her primary and later years of education, the reader conceptualizes the role of silence that women in Chinese tradition must conform to. Kingston adheres to this role of silence throughout the majority of the book, listening to her mother rather than speaking herself.

Kingston utilizes *The Woman Warrior* to explain the complexities of sexism within Chinese culture. These complexities include stereotypical gender roles that are placed upon women and continued through tradition. In order to question and reinforce these gender roles, Kingston utilizes story-telling as a medium to share the information she has gathered from both her experiences and her mothers. While many sexist traditions have been stopped or forgotten, there is always more to achieve towards the next step to equality.