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# "Dialogicality" in *The Woman Warrior*

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Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* has received both criticism and praise from a variety of audiences both in China and America. The five independent but interrelated parts of the story weave a dialogue of different consciousnesses contradicting and communicating with each other. The daughter of the story manages to reconstruct the mother's Chinese stories and identify herself as a Chinese American and articulate her voice through dialogue.

*Keywords: The Woman Warrior*, dialogue, identity

## Introduction

*The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts* (1976), a National Book Critics Circle Award-winner, is a representative work of Chinese American Writer, Maxine Hong Kingston. It combines Chinese history, myths, and beliefs together, and has become a classic in its innovative portrayal of multiple and intersecting identities—immigrant, female, Chinese, and American.

*The Woman Warrior* looks fragmented because it does not follow a linear time line as is expected in a memoir and it does not tell only one story. The five parts of the novel each focuses on a different person and tells a different story: "No-Name Woman" is about Kingston's long-dead aunt; "White Tigers" is about a mythical female warrior, Fa Mu Lan; "Shaman" is about Kingston's mother, Brave Orchid; "At the Western Palace" is about Kingston's aunt, Moon Orchid; and "A Song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe" is about Kingston herself.

This paper focuses on explaining the reason of its seemingly fragmented narration by cultivating the "dialogicality" of the story.

## Dialogue and "Dialogicality"

In *The Oxford Advanced Learner's English-Chinese Dictionary*, "dialogue" means "writing in the form of conversation or talk", "conversation, especially in literature, plays or films", "discussion between people with different opinions" (p. 396). In literary works, dialogue is always the direct quotation of people's conversation and talk. Words outside the quotation marks can be regarded as the author's monologue.

The former Soviet Union scholar, Mikhail M. Bakhtin (1984) abstracted a general trait, "dialogicality" from common dialogue. "Dialogicality" is "a special form of interaction among autonomous and equally signifying consciousnesses" (p. 284).

To be specific, Bakhtin (1984) explained that a dialogic novel "is constructed not as the whole of a single consciousness, absorbing other consciousnesses as objects into itself, but as a whole formed by the interaction

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of several consciousnesses, none of which entirely becomes an object for the other" (p. 18).

The consciousnesses involved in this interaction are independent from each other and of equal position. Among these consciousnesses, there are relationships of agreement/disagreement, affirmation/supplementation, question/answer, and so on. "Dialogicality" is the result of dialogue penetrating into texts with non-dialogic forms. As long as there are different consciousnesses agreeing with and disagreeing with, affirming and supplementing, questioning and answering each other, as long as there are two or more voices involved in a single utterance or monologue, there is dialogue. Hence the texts with non-dialogic forms can also be perceived as dialogue, as long as they are of "dialogicality".

Bakhtin (1984) proposed the division between "great dialogue" and "micro-dialogue". "Great dialogue" in a novel focuses on the dialogic relationships which reflect the dialogic nature of different consciousnesses in a society and human life; "Micro-dialogues" include the double-voiced conversation and talks among characters. In addition, "micro-dialogue" also includes the "inner dialogue" of the characters.

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### Micro-dialogues

"Micro-dialogue" is a specific interaction between all kinds of independent but equally signifying consciousnesses. It penetrates into almost every word of the novel, and makes it double-voiced. One voice expressed is usually accompanied by another voice complementing, contradicting, and disagreeing with it.

In *The Woman Warrior*, conversation, sometimes intensive and sometimes relaxed in tone, is always double-voiced, thus makes it dialogic on conversation level.

For example, when the mother inculcates Chinese social norms to the daughter, she transforms misogynic ideas as well. Utterances, like "Feeding girl is feeding cowbirds", "there's no profit in raising girls. Better to raise geese than girls" (Kingston, 1989, p. 46), have a two-fold direction, one being the internalized discrimination of the mother on the female, the other being the daughter's unutterable dissenting voice, indignation and reversion.

There are also "micro-dialogues" between Chinese etiquettes and American ones. In "White Tigers", the daughter follows a bird away into the mountains where an old man and an old woman greet her with: "Have you eaten rice today, little girl?" and she answers with "Yes, I have". In the bracket following, the daughter thinks she'd rather say, "No, I haven't. I am starved, do you have cookies? I like chocolate chip cookies" (Kingston, 1989, p. 36). Two totally different answers are juxtaposed, one disagreeing with the other. Thus, the daughter's reflection and confusion between the Chinese tradition and the American manner can be felt.

Besides, some words and expressions in the novel are double-voiced and highly dialogic. For example, in the first part of the novel, when the villagers attack the family of the pregnant No Name Woman, "As villagers closed in, we could see that some of them, probably men and women we know well, wore white masks" (Kingston, 1989, p. 4). These villagers remind us not Chinese but Ku Klux Klan in early America. The daughter mixes Chinese stories with her American experience.

When others' consciousnesses infiltrate into the characters' consciousnesses and are not in congruity with each other, the "inner dialogue" arises. The daughter struggles between her mother's ghost stories and the American present life. In "White Tigers", Fa Mu Lan, the woman warrior, is an imagined "self" split from her real "self".

The imagined "self" travels in a land juxtaposed with Chinese and American social norms so as to break away from her American life that "has been such a disappointment" (Kingston, 1989, p. 45). In the story, she is a champion fighter respected by her villagers. Instead of despising girls, her parents "killed a chicken and steamed it whole, as if there were welcoming home a son…" (Kingston, 1989, p. 34).

Interwoven into this story are elements of individualism which reflect the person's own sense of love and marriage,

> I would have for a new husband my own playmate, dear since childhood, who loved me so much he was to become a spirit bridegroom for my sake. We will be so happy when I came back to the valley, healthy and strong and not a ghost. (Kingston, 1989, p. 37)

In the story, she even gives birth to a child in the army, which is hard to imagine at all in the Chinese tradition.

**Great Dialogue**

In *The Woman Warrior*, "great dialogue" reveals the interaction between all kinds of social consciousnesses. The five independent parts of *The Woman Warrior* are unified by the interaction and dialogue of several consciousnesses. Dialogue between the mother's and the daughter's consciousness continues throughout the novel and, like a pivot, and combines the novel together. Rotating around this pivot, dialogue between the Chinese tradition and the mainstream American culture, between the daughter and the mainstream American culture are also going on.

The mother is a contradictory image. She is a firm keeper and transmitter of the old Chinese tradition; however, back in China, she used to be a brave and respectable shaman with new thinking. She now speaks for patriarchal norms; meanwhile, she encourages her daughter to be as brave as Fa Mu Lan.

"As an immigrate mother, Brave Orchid attempts to pass her knowledge and experience to her second-generation Chinese American daughter as a part of the shared notion of identity, despite the inequitable circumstances for women within this patriarchal structure" (Ho, 1999, p. 119). For Brave Orchid, even though the remnants of the Chinese social and cultural traditions place limits on women, preserving them in the United States is still a means of constructing, reinforcing, and commanding family-communal loyalty and socioeconomic survival.

The daughter is confused by adults who get "mad, evasive, and shut you up if you ask" (Kingston, 1989, p. 215). From her mother, answers are not always forthcoming or totally accessible. The immigrant Chinese mother selectively reconstructs her past life while the daughter tries to understand the complicated meaning of her mother's stories in relation to their present life in the United States. Frustrated is the daughter in her attempts to infer how this Chinese world fits into her own life. "Those of us in the first American generation have had to figure out how the invisible world the emigrants built around our childhoods fits in solid America" (Kingston, 1989, p. 6).

Paula Gunn Allen (1986) once noted that people caught in between two languages and cultures are often "inarticulate, almost paralyzed in their inability to direct their energies toward resolving what seems to them insoluble conflicts" (p. 135). Carolyn Heilbrum (1979) described Minority women as "outsiders twice over" (p. 37). Chinese American women are excluded both from the mainstream and from the ethnic centers of power.

At home, under the pressure of patriarchal norms and the autocracy of her champion-talker mother, the daughter loses her equal position to dialogue. She is confronted with prejudices against girls from China that

seep into conversation in America. She must deal with the image of girls as useless maggots, stink pigs, or cowbirds, fit to be killed or sold. Outside the family, with uncertainty toward her root culture and the hostility and despise from the white American culture, she also cannot get an equal position. At school and work—the outside world—the daughter is silenced not only by sexist but also by racist stereotypes that haunt her childhood and womanhood. She is doubly silenced by both "Chinese-feminine" and "American-feminine" models of behavior for young girls. She is considered retarded by some of her teachers, handicapped and silenced in her second-language English. The daughter's parents situate her as an outsider, half Chinese, half barbarian, raised among and taught by white ghosts, who threaten her parents and their way of life as well as their security in this country.

Instead of just accepting her mother's ideas passively, the daughter reconstructs the stories with her own understanding. In reshaping her ancestral past to fit her American present, the daughter is asserting an identity that is neither Chinese nor white American, but distinctively Chinese American. In telling the story of "No Name Women", the daughter embellishes and transforms the story to make it resonate in her own Chinese American life. She subverts her mother's more practical, austere telling of the story and articulates secrets that her parents and Chinese village have kept hidden. She also demonstrates her affinity for the ostracized aunt by exploring versions of her story that are different from the patriarchal one. Thus, Maxine imagines that her aunt is positioned as an outcast, a wild woman, a lover of beauty, a sensuous woman, a beloved daughter, an adventurer and a risk-taker.

She shifts the focus from physical prowess to verbal and textual power. As a result, the daughter is no longer a listener. By the reworking of her mother's stories, she wins equal position to dialogue with her mother and the Chinese culture her mother delegates, thereby articulating her own voice.

## Conclusion

Bakhtin's dialogic theory takes "Cultural Hegemonism" and "Cultural Separatism" as the targets, calling for a true "culture self-consciousness" by means of dialogue. Dialogue bridges different cultures, like the ancient and present cultures, the Chinese and Western cultures. In a multicultural society, like America, the crisis and frustrations brought by cultural conflicts and combats make Kingston realize that the Chinese tradition and the mainstream American culture can coexist harmoniously only when they can struggle for a dialogue with each other in equal position, communicating and learning from others' strong points so as to offset weaknesses. A warrior of words, Maxine Hong Kingston forges fractured myths and memories into an incandescent whole, achieving a new understanding of her family's past and her own present, and thus reveals a world rich in multiple opinions, values and experience.

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