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**The Liquid Nature of Self in Maxine Kingston's**

**Autobiographical Story *The Woman Warrior***

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Bachelor of Arts in English

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May, 1995

Submitted in partial fulfillment of requirements for the degree

MASTER OF ARTS IN ENGLISH

at the

CLEVELAND STATE UNIVERSTIY

March, 2015

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**We hereby approve this thesis**

**For**

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**Candidate for the Master of Arts Degree in English**

**For the department of**

**ENGLISH**

**And**

**CLEVELAND STATE UNIVERSITY'S**

**College of Graduate Studies**

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4/2/2015

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**Student's Date of Defense**

Dedicated with appreciation for the patience, understanding, and guidance of my family  
and professors.

My special gratitude to Dr. Carnell, Dr. Larson, Dr. Burrell, Dr. Lardner, as well as Jerry,  
Patrick and Estera Jablonski.

## **The Liquid Nature of Self in Maxine Kingston's**

### **Autobiographical Story *The Woman Warrior***

Evelyn Jablonski

#### **ABSTRACT**

This work examines the notion of self in the autobiographical narrative of Maxine Hong Kingston. Self-writing is constructing a discursive body, and Kingston presents the reader with a unique articulation of her identity. Conventional autobiographical narratives tend to define a self as an opposition to the other. In such texts the literary discourse is intended to secure the integrity of the self. This image of the self can be called conventional. While the conventional narrative self claims to demonstrate developmental stages of an individual that acquires his or her maturity by the end of the quest, the constantly changing self of Maxine Hong Kingston is never finished. Narrating such an ever-growing self, results in a textual presentation of infinite potentiality. A classical autobiographical self would be immune from outer influences, while Kingston's autobiographical persona is open to all narrative directions and so can be viewed as a "liquid" narrative body, capable of flowing and spreading. Her major narrator for that purpose shares common elements with her entire group of characters. My aim in this work is to show how Kingston depicts her characters as the "liquid narrative self."

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## Chapter I

### Introduction

There are two distinct schools in the literary field of Kingston's criticism. One of those schools is engaged in an on-going discussion of Kingston's unique narrative style, while the other one examines Kingston's approach to the narrative of self. There is no literary criticism available that would combine these two perspectives, approaching Kingston's narrative technique through the lens of self. This paper argues that in order to fully appreciate the unique nature of *The Woman Warrior's* narrative forms and techniques, one should become familiar with the author's perspective of self.

Many critics examine Kingston's narrative techniques. Angela Petit advocates Maxine Kingston's belief in the power of words, as it is reflected in "No Name Woman." Petit believes in the necessity of instilling appreciation for words as instruments of creation and she appreciates Kingston's skill to use her words as tools to do so. Words, according to her, are fragile because they carry more than one meaning. Ambiguity and alternative meanings spring naturally from words. Petit reminds the reader about the postmodern perspective of discourse constructing knowledge, and moves on reflecting on the fact that knowledge does not exist before or beyond the language, but is "symbolically produced" through the language and confirmed by agreement within a

particular community. Petit analyzes Kingston's writing through the lens of postmodern theory.

Similarly to Petit, Margaret Mitchell concentrates on Kingston's narrative forms and techniques. She delineates Kingston's integration of oral storytelling into her written narrative. The linguists and theorists that Mitchell cites discuss some very important issues of using language in a new manner. Unfortunately, the works of those critics would probably never be read by undergraduate students, according to Mitchell. Maxine Kingston, on the other hand, introduces the same ideas the critics do in her autobiography.

The second school of Kingston's criticism analyzes her writing of "self" from a minority (race or gender) perspective. Lin Yutang analyzes Kingston's personal experiences of racial oppression and racial difference in the creation of her autobiography. The second school of criticism, when examining Kingston's autobiographical text through a perspective of a self-writing, tends to classify the writings in sub-categories, such as gender self, racial self, social self, and political self. This tendency is especially obvious in case criticism of race or gender. Critics either focus on the gender self, the political self, or the racial self. In this paper I will focus on what I call a "liquid self" narrative. A liquid self is free from identifying traits: social, racial, ethnic, or otherwise. Those critics, who study self and language separately, bypass the distinctive features of *The Woman Warrior* as an autobiographical novelty. They substitute the study of the whole text by either discussing the language or the self. In such cases either the language becomes cut off from the discussion of the self or the self is cut off from the consideration of the style and the language. These two critical mistakes can be compared

to a musical transposition of an orchestral repertoire. Linguistic analysis of the textual features requires a Saussurean approach to language. Saussure distinguished between *langage*, *langue*, and *parole*. These words can be translated into English as style, language, and speech. Since I have not found any critic who has put these two analyzing perspectives together and has tried to analyze Kingston's story of "self" based on her innovating, unconventional writing techniques, I analyze *The Woman Warrior* through the language of the narrator and through the speech of each individual character.

I combine the psychoanalytic approach of Lacan and linguistic studies of Bakhtin in a close reading of *The Woman Warrior*. I show how Bakhtin's *разноречие* serves as a helpful tool to understanding the multi-generational collective narrative of the Kingston's life story. I also claim that Lacanian "language speaking the self" approach can serve as a bridge joining contemporary theorists of Kingston's language and self.

I deploy a non-Western philosophical notion of self, contrasting it to the more traditional Western understanding of an individual as bounded to a specific person. I claim that Kingston shares a non-western perspective of self that is reflected in her innovative narrative technique that I refer to as the technique of liquid self-writing. My term is connected to the Eastern philosophical schools of Daoism and Buddhism. The literary term liquid self-writing reflects Kingston's choice of narrative techniques, while Eastern philosophies serve as theoretical background that supports my claim.

Kingston narrates her self-identity in a collage-like way since it incorporates various stories presented through multiple narrators. Kingston's book is written unconventionally, and thus should not be conventionally classified. What may critics see

as different individuals is simply a “liquid self” playing with masks. Liquid self lacks any separate identity and depends entirely on an endless collection of selves to pop it up: the identity’s name, the identity’s autobiography, the identity’s parents, family, school, friends, job... When all that is taken away, the liquid self will find it difficult to grasp who he or she really is. Kingston is trying to show how our identities are also liquid, void of a center doctrine, and constantly changing to adapt to the world around us.

Conventional autobiographies are structured according to western narrative tradition that is in its turn based on Aristotelian logic, deploying dichotomous oppositions. Writers of conventionally structured autobiographies narrate the self from the perspective of opposition to “the other.” As an example, female narrating a conventional “self” would contrast it with the male “self,” and a racial minority will be contrasted against the racial “self” of a white narrator. It is natural for a conventional perspective of self to search for differences among others, because as soon as one conceives a self, one must also conceive of “the other.”

In my paper I do not identify “the other” in terms of canonicity, but from the perspective of the Non-Western philosophical scholarship. Neither do I intend to mix the concept of conventionality with that of canonicity. The term *conventionality* in my paper may refer to two different aspects: narratological features and worldview. In Kingston’s writing, her book can be classified as unconventional both from the position of her innovative narratological techniques, as well philosophical perspective.

For Kingston the conventional self lacks inherent self existence and it has to keep constructing itself. Without having identifying characteristics, a person is lost until he or she realizes the liquidity of his or her true nature of self. A being eventually comes to the

realization that when he or she takes into account that his or her identity is constantly changing, he or she must adapt to searching for it under those circumstances. That is why although conventionally speaking, Kingston's book may be categorized as Chinese autobiography from a racial perspective, and a female autobiography from the perspective of gender, it is not fully correct to do so in case of Kingston, because her book is not written in a conventional narrative style. Kingston's unconventional narrative technique is the result of her perspective of a "self" that appears to be based on Chinese philosophical school of Daodejing (sometimes spelled Tao Te Ching). Kingston's perspective of self requires voicing her narrative self through voicing others.

Kingston shares the belief of Chinese school of semiotics, that language is the main tool to build and articulate phenomenal reality. Both Saussure and the Chinese school of semiotics differentiate between cognition and perception. Cognition is viewed as a non-conceptual state or experience that cannot be verbalized. Unlike cognition, perception is viewed as a qualified cognition, and it has to be determined. "Flower" can be cognized. By contrast, "flowerhood" can only be perceived. Thus "flowerhood" is viewed as a conceptual construction. Both schools believe that language is the means of sharing or verbalizing cognition. Kingston's narrative technique encourages the reader to engage in the act of co-experiencing the cognition. When Maxine retells and reinterprets her mother's stories, her liquid self flows through her mother's cognition, and constructs her own new perception of the story.

Ronald Bogue examines Kingston's narration from a linguistic perspective. Kingston, according to Bogue, "deterritorializes" language, breaking the borders

between English and Chinese. Bogue compares Kingston to Tao Lin, explaining that although both writers are of Chinese origin, Kingston identifies herself as Chinese American, while Tao Lin believes that her background did not affect her life or writing as much, and she writes as an American. Tao Lin interrogates Kingston's depiction of race. She admits, saying "I want in my fiction to edit race..." despite many differences, both Kingston and Lin are American writers and their differences are merely functions of context. It makes sense that readers and critics readily view Kingston as a Chinese American writer. The writer herself has never wanted to be seen in such a category; however she believes that categorizing her in such a way, readers act as if they deny everything they previously read in her books. I cannot see how Bogue's analysis of *The Woman Warrior* considers the unity of the form and the content of the text. The analysis of the language in the article does not go any further than the language of the writer. Such an analysis does not answer such questions as why such narrative technique is used. There is no reference to the notion of self found in Bogue's article. My major claim in this thesis is that Kingston's narrative technique and her use of language can only be understood through the prism of her concept of self.

Yoon Sun Lee categorizes Kingston's writings based on her narrative style. Yoon Sun Lee contrasts Kingston's autobiography with the realism of American literary tradition. Although Lee does not necessarily advocate the American abuse of realism, she notices significant narrative difficulties between the two literary traditions. Chinese American criticism, she declares, seems to build its cultural capital by repudiating realism as epistemologically naïve. The critics that espouse such perspective insist on independent agency of language. They believe in aesthetic autonomy of literature. In her

article, Lee rethinks the political stakes of realism. I espouse linguistic theories of Bakhtin and Saussure, as well as those of Eastern schools of semiotics. Language is viewed by those schools as the verbalized construct of individual perceptions, and not as an independent agency. Similarly to other linguists, Lee does not discuss the notion of self in her article. She cuts off her analysis of the text from considerations of the genre of autobiography.

I find Kingston to be a very American writer. Kingston portrays her uniqueness as American. She does not isolate herself as a writer. She does not see her uniqueness as a limiting factor. As a writer, Kingston revises American identity by bringing it back to its roots. American identity is based on freedom. Kingston exercises her freedom by choosing her narratological style. She is unique as a writer, but she is unique as a part of the United States. She celebrates her Americanness by celebrating her uniqueness. Kingston is not trying to create new American identity. Hers is an old traditional view with a new narratological practice.

Unlike all of the mentioned critics, I will be focusing on the close reading of Kingston's autobiographical narrative. I will be examining her narratological features: style, form, and techniques, linking them to the theories of Bakhtin and Lacan and the Non-western philosophy of self. This paper will show that a philosophical construct of the liquid self is the key feature of Kingston's text.

## **Chapter II**

### **The Construction of a Self**

This chapter investigates the interpretational techniques best suit Kingston's depiction of self. I will show how Kingston's book can be read through the lens of Bakhtin's theory of *разноречие*, and how Kingston's perspective of self is similar to Lacan's notion of the "language speaking the self." The chapter will further examine how the "liquid self" analysis may be helpful in understanding Kingston's choice of narrators in her story.

I will show how Kingston's depiction of self can be examined from stylistic perspective. Kingston's narrative device allows her to let the story move from character to character constantly shifting both focus and point of view. Kingston's narrating techniques represent diversity of individual voices, reminding us of what Mikhail M. Bakhtin referred to as *разноречие*. This Russian term is sometimes translated as "heteroglossia," but can also mean types of speech. It is used to describe the internal stratification of languages. Central to Bakhtin's theory of linguistic is his belief that language is fundamentally dialogic. Living language exhibits heteroglossia. Kingston's autobiography, I believe is a wonderful example of Bakhtin's heteroglossia: all

Kingston's characters narrate the story using different narrative styles due to their age, gender, and race. Bakhtin wrote that heteroglossia is interplay among the languages of generations, age groups, and social classes. Kingston's book, from my perspective, celebrates the multiplicity of narrative styles, and the variety of voices, and thus can be a good example of Bakhtin's theory. That approach alone, while can allow to examine the work through the perspective of imagery, force, and clarity, will not reflect how the writer's philosophical perspective may influence the narrative style or how the narrative style that is chosen can reflect a position of self. Kingston's construction of a liquid self can be looked at through the lenses of Jacques Lacan and Mikhail Bakhtin. The porosity of the liquid self can be understood through *разноречие* or heteroglossia that I am going to explain later. The fragmentation of individuality present in Kingston's life story can be seen also through Jacques Lacan's mirror stage theory.

As a Chinese American writer, Kingston was probably familiar with both Western and Eastern philosophical schools of self. Regardless of significant differences between the two philosophical perspectives, such Western literary critics as Jacques Lacan seem to present ideas very similar to Eastern school of thought. Jacques Lacan claims there is a strong connection between the self and the language. Language in Lacan's analysis operates on the self as much as the self operates on the language. Language speaks the self. But in this process, the self becomes split between a conscious self and an unconscious self. This idea is very similar to that of Eastern philosophical school's teaching of mindfulness. Kingston, being familiar with both Lacan and with Chinese philosophers, chooses to narrate herself from a mindful perspective of active narrative presence a teach moment of the text, and at times from the perspective of active listening.

As if following the advice of Lacan, Kingston connects the functioning of the language with the functioning of the self.

Lacan echoes Bakhtin, when he says that the intuitive self always comes before the linguistic self. The language creates the “self,” and doing it, in its turn, also creates “the other.” “The other,” for Lacan designates a mirror image, a competitor, another person. It is a symbolic dimension of “self.” Lacan explains that intuitive self loses contact with the body. The Eastern tradition uses the term “transcends.” This particular idea of Lacan echoes the Chinese philosophical view of a universal self that exists in many fragmented states. While Lacan explains this disconnection of the self with the body using Freudian vocabulary, tackling the concept of castration, Kingston’s writing differs significantly from Lacanian patriarchal phallogocentric theory. Kingston’s narrative fragmentation of self can be viewed through Lacanian mirror stage theory.

Understanding of Kingston’s personal conception of self is key to understanding her narrative autobiographical technique. Her book is narrated as a quest to establish the right concept of self. At the beginning of the book Kingston, a young Chinese immigrant to America, has weak self-esteem. Throughout the story, she listens to many different voices of her relatives and relations, and that allows her to arrive at the insight that all those voices of her extended family are also her own. For young Maxine, it takes the whole community to create a true self, and the loss of identity comes with the loss of this communal notion of self-identification.

According to the Non-western philosophical tradition, an ultimate dimension of self is free from being bounded in a specific individuality. It rather shares the same

elements with an entire universe in general, and human race in particular. This unity can especially be seen through the multi-generational family ties. Kingston is creating a text that is best described as grounded in the construction of such a multi-generational narrative of her liquid self. In the chapter “No Name Woman,” narrated by Kingston’s mother, Kingston tells the reader how Maxine learns from her mother that she had lost her aunt. Maxine undertakes a writer’s quest to find her aunt through her book. Ancestors for Chinese people are part of their self. Memory about them is very important for self-identity.

We stood together in the middle of our house, in the family hall with the pictures and tables of our ancestors around us, and looked straight ahead. (4)

When the villagers broke into the house to disgrace Kingston’s aunt, her mother called for support of their ancestors. Kingston narrates this part of the story and many other ones from the first person plural, as if referring to the plurality of the liquid self. Later Kingston admits why it is so important for her to justify the revenge for her aunt. Kingston is looking for ancestral help for help from her own liquid self in the character of her aunt: “Unless I see her life branching into mine, she gives me no ancestral help.”(8) When Kingston describes how her aunt was brushing her hair, she immediately adds: “My mother did the same to me.” (9) Kingston imagines how her aunt’s lover might have enjoyed her aunt’s beauty. Her tone convinces the reader that Kingston imagines herself to be in her aunt’s place.

I hope my aunt’s lover appreciated a smooth brow, that he wasn’t just a

tits-and-ass man.” (9)

By depicting young Maxine’s reaction towards her aunt’s life story, Kingston leads the reader to realization how her major narrator identifies herself with her aunt.

Bakhtin’s heteroglossia can be seen in Kingston’s dialogical narrative of her life story. Maxine-the-narrator constantly mimics and echoes her mother’s story-talk. While re-writing her mother’s story about the no name aunt gives Maxine-the-character comfort, it is also an effective narrative technique. Kingston uses it to show the reader the “liquid” nature of her character’s individual voices. “Liquid” self is a misnomer because there is so little of “self” in it, as opposed to conventional self. Traditional criticism applied to Kingston’s writing will bypass important features of her narration, substituting analysis of Kingston’s individual writing techniques for social, racial, or gender interpretation of her book.

The “liquid self” goes beyond a particular individual. In order to present her liquid narrative self Kingston uses various narratological devices. She draws from the well of Chinese literary imagery and symbolism. In Kingston’s story the dragon often points to many different qualities of self. With the symbol of dragon playing an important role in Chinese culture, it is not a surprise to find dragon imagery in Kingston’s autobiography. Dragons, in Chinese philosophy often represent inner qualities of human beings both positive and negative. The dragon is rarely seen in Chinese philosophy as a separate mythological entity. In the chapter White Tiger, Kingston uses the symbolism of the dragon to refer to what I call the “liquid self.” According to Chinese philosophical tradition, in order to come to understanding of the true nature of self, one must see beyond a particular individual, and learn to see the self that is able to accept all forms and

shapes. For example, to see a mother in the daughter, and go beyond it to see one common self present in both of them.

You have to infer the whole dragon from the parts you can see and touch,” the old people would say. Unlike tigers, dragons are so immense, I would never see on in its entire. (28)

Similarly to dragons, the “liquid self” is impossible to be seen in any other form or shape but only through a particular individual, and yet any particular part of the self should not be mistakenly taken for the whole. Since, according to Chinese philosophical teaching, the true nature of self is eternal, it is not a surprise that Kingston uses symbolism of dragons in connection to the eternal self.

The closest I came to seeing a dragon whole was when the old people cut away a small strip of bark on a pine that was over three thousand years old. The resin underneath flows in the swirling shapes of dragons. If you should decide during your old age that you would like to live another five hundred years, come here and drink ten pounds of this sap. (29)

The dimension of the liquid self goes beyond human birth and death. Kingston depicts her characters as sharing universal consciousness.

Her text embodies a view of identity grounded in the construction of eternal narrative self. This passage suggests that the realization of the true nature of self can lead

one to immortality. It is therefore not surprising that the passage about dragons is followed by the passage about mind, another element of self.

I learned to make my mind large, as the universe is large, so that there is room for paradoxes.(29)

This phrase resonates with Chinese philosophical perspective of self that teaches the self to be full of paradoxes, and yet it is as vast as the universe. Kingston depicts her mother's belief in eternal qualities of self. When in the chapter "White Tigers" the Old Woman shows Maxine her mother for the second time, her mother talks about Maxine as if she knew that human self lives forever.

Thank you for taking our daughter. Wherever she is she must be happy now. She will certainly come back. If she is alive, and if she is a spirit, you have given her a decent line. (31)

Kingston uses the parents of Maxine-the-character to communicate to the reader a very deep philosophical teaching about self. Instead of using a more traditional to the Western culture dichotomy of life and death, Kingston abandons the notion of death all together. She uses the term "spirit" to convey what the reader might visualize as death. Another interesting turn present in the same phrase alludes to yet one more philosophical viewpoint from the ancient East. Rather than using a conventionally Western phrase such as "her spirit," Kingston writes, "she is a spirit."

Unlike a Western dichotomous division of an individual as the body and the spirit or mind, the Chinese believe that the mind and the spirit is the whole individual and not

just a part of her. The Chinese school looks at the wholeness of individuality from a slightly different perspective of a Universal Mind. The word that Wang Yangming used means heart-mind. The following passage is from his recorded sayings:

Before you looked at these flowers, they along with your heart-mind had reverted to a state of stillness. When you came and looked upon these flowers, their colors became clear. This shows these flowers are not outside your heart-mind.

(Ivanhoe, *Readings in Classical Chinese Philosophy*, 109)

On the basis of passages like this one, Wang Yangming has often been interpreted as denying that the things which make up the universe exist independently of human minds or souls.

My theory of description of Kingston's self as a "liquid self" is based on the basic elements of Chinese philosophical schools. It builds upon the relationship between the plurality of individuals in the world of our experience and the original unity which they hold to be the more fundamental reality. It is meant to contrast with the traditionally western notion of self. Kingston explores a self of relationship. She is interested in depicting her "liquid self" beyond shapes and features of a particular individual.

## Chapter III

### Self as a Nation in Kingston's Autobiographical Narrative

This chapter sets out to analyze the differences between depicting self in conventional and non-conventional autobiographical narratives so that we may better understand how Kingston is challenging the preconceptions of traditional autobiographies. I will pay particular attention to the way self is narrated by Benjamin Franklin in his *Autobiography* and by Maxine Kingston in *The Woman Warrior*. Franklin's story of self is a classical exemplar of traditional narrative style. *The Woman Warrior* is written by a female writer, who is at the same time a representative of racial minority in literature. The two writers speak in different generational and gender voices. They both raise questions of national identity formation, but answer them differently. The main focus of this chapter will be to show how self is depicted in Kingston's story as opposed to the Franklin's book.

Ana Manzanos studies Franklin's famous autobiography comparing and contrasting it with Kingston's. In her article, Manzanos claims that the new conception of self corresponds to a new understanding of the nation. She argues for two ways of

envisioning the self and the nation. One is a “univocal entity” (Franklin’s) and the other is grotesque porosity (Kingston’s). The term “grotesque porosity” that Manzananas uses reflects the idea of “liquid self.” Manzananas explains how a self in Kingston’s autobiography lacks solid borders, thus is open to influences coming from other characters. By contrast, Franklin writes about his self that is closely connected to the new nation. This new nation is a univocal entity, because the borders that secure it from the influences of other countries are strongly protected by the government.

When I compare Kingston to Franklin, I argue that Kingston does not use the same linear narrative as Franklin does. I do not mean to say Kingston could not have used such a linear narrative. Her narratological style is solely her choice. It is not based neither on her gender nor race. When I refer to Franklin’s writing as “common,” I do it from the perspective of narratological techniques as being traditional versus innovative. This classification is not based on canonicity. Kingston’s choice of her narratological techniques is based on her philosophical perspective. Her innovative narrative style does not make her any less an American writer. Kingston’s life story is very American. Her non-conventionality, or her ability to choose not to conform, is particularly American.

Franklin’s life story serves as a contrast to highlight the unique narratological features of *The Woman Warrior*. I espouse literary criticism of Ana Manzananas, acknowledges great differences between the canonical narrative style of Franklin and the softer articulation of Maxine Kingston. Manzananas observes that nations emerge as political powers through the literary texts. She compares the writing of self to the writing of nations, calling both constructions. Both are made of physical and discursive borders and define themselves in the opposition to otherness. The major thesis of her article is

that in American autobiography, narrators “inscribe themselves into the nation of the nations through the gateway of autobiographies.” She agrees with Mikhail Bakhtin in his view of Franklin’s autobiography as an example of the classical self/body, complete, finished, and secured within a discursive line. Both Bahtin and Manzanias are right in that Franklin’s autobiography seem to lack subjectivity usually expected of the genre. Yet structuring the autobiography in an objective way does not necessarily mean that the text reveals the real man. Franklin’s autobiography is often seen as a list of resolutions. Regardless of the fact that throughout the text Franklin uses different literary techniques to distance himself from the religious past of pilgrims of the nation, his autobiography is written in the tradition of moral perfection. Manzanias recalls John Bunyan’s *the Pilgrim Progress*, who calls Franklin’s autobiography a moral fable.

While Franklin’s autobiographical narrative constructs his individuality as bounded to a particular American national and individual identity, the constantly changing self of Kingston is limitless. Kingston depicts her story through the prism of a universal dimension that is not foregrounded in a national or historical location. A typically American interpretational level that I notice in Franklin’s text is that of journey of economic hardship to prosperity. In other words, Franklin’s autobiography could be summed up as a story of success based on the movement of progress towards perfection. In contrast to Franklin, Kingston re-writes and reconstructs American dream as well as canonical self and traditional understanding of a nation. She redefines limits and borders of conventional discourses. Manzanias observes that *The Woman Warrior* becomes a “grotesque body that outgrows its own limits.” I use the term “Universal Dimension” solely from a metaphysical perspective. It stands for an underground field of all being. Its

nature is neither similar to nor different from any particular culture. It is fundamentally void of any classifications. It is neither American nor Chinese.

Kingston puts out in front of the reader the textual mosaic or puzzle to solve. Being a Chinese-American writer, she writes some chapters in broken English. Her discursive border of both her individual self as well as her national self gradually disappears. Kingston demonstrates no need to secure her identity. Her character does not lack self-awareness, but because her self-awareness expands beyond the borders of an individual or a nation. Her narrator undergoes the process of various transformations that differ from traditionally western perspective of evolutionary process of personas in conventional autobiographies. For Kingston this process of transformation of characters is never a journey from point A to point B. Her overall textual structure reflects this non-linear philosophical perspective. Kingston's textual journey is open to any direction: to the past, towards her ancestors as much as to the future, towards her son.

Franklin's life story is one of the great examples of canonical American autobiography. It is also an example of conventional, straightforward, and linear storyline. Manzanas correctly notices that the fact that Franklin considers himself more American than British does not allow us to see a bicultural heritage in his narrative. Franklin constructs his text with the perspective of both textual as well as political authority. Benjamin Franklin, who was considered "the original American" by the British, was first the symbol of an American for them. Later Franklin became the symbol of an American for Americans also. He intended this to happen when he wrote his autobiography. According to Franklin, as Manzanas explains, with Providence and hard work an individual can become whoever he or she desires. Anybody can escape his or her

origins, and transform the self. The earlier notion in European tradition was that a son was supposed to do what his father did. Franklin proved by his life and by his book, that a self can become different from his or her father. His father was a candle-maker, boiling animal fats. It was a social level just above the regular worker. Franklin became a philanthropist, a person who supports community projects, an inventor, and a major scientist. Franklin proved that electricity and lightning have the same origin. Businessman and entrepreneur, politician and a peacemaker, abolitionist and a public writer, Franklin proved that he could change his own self.

Unlike Franklin, Kingston cannot inscribe herself in this linear journey to America. Her literary narrative stands out from the common tradition. As a person and as a writer she creates an identity whose voice has a recognizable “accent,” distinct features in contrast to canonically fashioned narratives and sounds loud enough for a silenced by socially selective mutism narrator. Structurally we might compare Kingston’s story to that of a good painter’s work. A good painter constantly erases and makes changes to his sketch. This sketch recounts an attempt to catch the artist’s own shadow. In this chase Kingston runs faster and faster, and farther and farther from her family, till she finally stops to see if the shadow will stop and return back to her self. The shadow of her past and that of the past of her ancestors stops to listen to the quiet narrator’s voice, immersed in a world of storytelling, rich in oral culture.

Kingston’s story can be looked at from a racial or ethnic perspective. Hers is a story of a second generation Chinese immigrant. Her mother, a first generation of Chinese immigration, plays a significant role in the narrative. Most of the stories told by Kingston are legends retold to her by her mother. Many of them are the tales of ghosts

that often evoke vivid images in young character. Her autobiographical narration in this case functions as a collection of those ethnic Chinese tales that serves to explain the author's access to authenticity. Issues of ethnic authenticity are widely discussed in the field of autobiographical criticism. Rachel Ihara and Jaime Cleland both focus on the topic of authorship in ethnic literature. They believe that racial authenticity was challenged nearly for two decades. This transition may have happened due to the shortage of ethnic authors. Yet I believe that an authentic ethnic narrative might also be constructed through the medium of autobiographical narrative.

From the perspective of tone, and from the way she chooses to use English language, Kingston's writing can easily be read as an example of Chinese American tradition. Kingston, inspired by listening to her mother's stories, masters the art and design of authentic Chinese storytelling. On one level, of course, this account of learning the art of ethnic storytelling serves to provide additional evidence of the author's deep ties to Chinese tradition, further reinforcing her role as cultural ambassador. Yet it makes sense to read Kingston's discussion of storytelling as a commentary on her own literary creativity in general, and her writing abilities in both Chinese and English. Her introduction to the storytelling and her translation of native stories into English anticipates the merge of the two cultures. Her recollections of her childhood memories of listening to her mother's stories ultimately imply that these experiences, and not her years of western education alone, formed the basis of her creative talent.

Night after night my mother would talk-story until we fell asleep. I could not tell where the stories left off and the dreams began, her voice the voice of heroine in my sleep. And on Sundays from noon to midnight we

went to the movies at the Confucius Church. We saw swordsmen jump over houses from a standstill; they didn't need a running start. At last I saw, that I too had been in the presence of a great power, my mother talking-story.

(19)

By becoming a writer, Kingston allows her mother's "liquid self" to express her ideas through Kingston. Until Kingston's persona found her true self, it remained delusional by the conventional perception of self. Kingston depicts the pain of growth into the new understanding of self. What Kingston's "liquid self" is thinking about her "I" is highly determined by what Maxine-the-character thinks about her mother, and what her mother thinks about her.

Unlike Franklin's national self, Kingston's liquid self is only hiding its "true nature" behind the ethnic familial unity. Thus, beyond illustrating the writer's early recognition of her own ethnic otherness and framing the descriptions of further experiences of racism to follow, the book also demonstrates Kingston's reasons for taking a pen. Her early childhood memories help to lay the groundwork for a theory of liquid authorship. Kingston recalls how her mother was pointing at Kingston's early childhood emotional experiences.

When you were little, all you had to say was "I'm not a bad girl," and you could make yourself cry," my mother says, talking-story about my childhood.

(46)

Ihara and Jaime explore the relationship between experiences and stories in their article “Ethnic Authorship and the Autobiographical Act.” They are giving an example how Suin Sin Far had an encounter with childhood bullies, and how she and her brother were teased and beaten by other children for being Chinese. The siblings revise history, proudly reporting back to their skeptical parents that they have won the battle. They find an element of literary creativity in transforming their story of bigotry into one of triumph. While Franklin’s autobiographical narrative is consciously foregrounded in American national soil, Kingston’s liquid self-story is bounded to her racial roots only conditionally. Her major narrative focus is at the multi-generational unity of a particular family.

Both the personal self and national self can be either structured as having liquid or solid nature. Both Franklin and Kingston investigate the image of personal self in contrast to the national self. Although the two autobiographies are written from very different perspectives, they have one thing in common. Regardless of the fact that both writers see their personal self strongly connected to the national self, Franklin narrates from an authoritarian perspective, while Kingston transcends both notions of the self and the nation.

In Franklin’s autobiography which is written in the conventional manner, the persona’s reactions are dictated by what other characters, like his father or brother, as well as the British and the Americans think about him. In contrast to Franklin, Kingston narrates her self-identity without conforming to what any of the characters say about her. Her main character is more interested in what her ancestors are telling about themselves. Using the technique of voicing her ancestors in the search of her own self, Kingston

adopts a unique writing style that differs from the conventional autobiographical narrative.

## Chapter IV

### The Construction of a Liquid Self

This chapter explores Kingston's view of the nature of liquid self. *The Woman Warrior* is narrated in such a way that personal experiences of different characters are depicted as seen through the eyes of the protagonist narrator. As a writer she deploys these narrating strategies in order to portray the self from a non-western philosophical perspective. This position allows Kingston to expand the boundaries of traditional autobiographical narrative. The chapter will also discuss Kingston's point of departure, which is to craft a major character whose task is to create other narrating characters of opposing forces to balance the story line. The chapter will also present ideas of Chinese philosophical writing about the notion of non-self.

In her autobiography, Kingston narrates her self-identity in a collage-like way. A conventional autobiographical narrative, especially when seen as a search of self, often requires a notion of "the other." It is easy to see in Kingston's storyline a dichotomy of Chinese narrative self to the world of American reader constructed by "the other." Several critics have noticed interesting interpretational layers and textual parallels that allow further search for understanding of Kingston's narrative perspective. The narrator's

aunt, according to Diane Simmons lost not only her life, but the right to be remembered. Simmons identifies Edward Said's Orientalist's construction of the other with the way womanhood is constructed by the controlling narratives of male writers. For Said, Europe articulates the Orient. According to Simmons, subjugating narrative of the West only reflects similar subjugating attitude of Chinese men towards women. Simmons clarifies that she is not concerned with the gender in the language construction as much as with the notion of oppression in general. In her multiple interviews with various critics, Kingston admits that she does not want to be seen as a writer that narrates from a position of a racial or sexual other. Her narrating challenges the western traditional of classification. The difficulty of categorizing Kingston's work may lead critics to question the notion of literary and genre categories. The Western system of logic depends on dichotomous classifications. Kingston allows no dichotomy in between duality in her writing, and instead forms her style around various Western as well as non-Western writing techniques. In Kingston the west defines the east the way yin defines yang in Chinese philosophy.

Kingston's story is built around what might seem as dialectically opposed narrative forces. On the one hand, there is the aunt. She is unnamed and almost legendary. Both Kingston's mother and Maxine-the-character narrate the story of the aunt who has an illegitimate child during her husband's absence. She is shunned by her family and drowns herself and her baby in the family well. She is depicted as the person isolated from nature. The opposite of this identity is the legendary Fa Mu Lan. She is in Taoist union with nature, and she is a warrior who leads the army of villagers to avenge her family. In contrast to the No Name Woman, Fa Mu Lan has a magic water ground. Both

women are anonymous. The text suggests the fictionality of both characters. Kingston balances those co-narrators with the voices of two real women who existed in her life: the Brave Orchid and the Moon Orchid. These are Kingston's mother and her mother's sister. They too are opposites. Kingston's mother, Brave Orchid, is a strong personality. She receives good medical education in China. She cures the sick, and is known to be a shaman. When she follows her husband to America, she has to work in the laundry that he owns. Brave Orchid can be viewed as a counterpart of Fa Mu Lan. Moon Orchid is the contrast to her sister. It is hard for her to find herself in her new home in America. She lapses into insanity and dies. She can be viewed as the counterpart of No Name Woman. These four co-narrators map out the paradigm of Kingston's liquid self, and the narrative goal of Kingston is to center herself in the story. The four co-narrators also lay the foundation to non-linear textual parameters.

Kingston is creating a text best described as founded on the Chinese philosophical school of thought. Many autobiographies are structured in a linear way and they tend to focus on the author by taking an introspective look into the author's life and mind. While most autobiographies are written in a first-person voice, Maxine Kingston's autobiography *The Woman Warrior* is written as the tales of several women as a natural continuation of an ancient Chinese view of a self. Maxine Hong Kingston's years of extensive training in Chinese classics sharpened her expertise and passion for the ancient arts of both philosophy and poetry, and opened the door into an absolutely new understanding of an individual to Western readers, thus pushing her to challenge the Western idea of individuality. Kingston's individual self is depicted as a group of narrating characters. Ancient Chinese writers such as Laozi in *The Daodejing* or

Confucius in *The Analects* have long contemplated on the nature of the self. For Kingston, as a writer, speaking from the perspectives of two cultural backgrounds could present narrative and structural challenges and add interpretational complexity to the reader. Kingston chooses to write from a position that holds no single solid perspective. Her individual “liquid” self-affiliation does not fall into any conventional category. Narrating the true nature of a self, Kingston leads the reader towards realization of the difference between a self and an identity by rearticulating the limits of the self and of the nation as it disrupts the individual and the communal selves.

The Chinese worldview distinguishes between the self of human experiences and the “true self.” This distinction was put to the extreme by more modern Chinese writers such as Yeng Rensan and Ouyang Jinwu in *The Way of Passing Mind* and *The Two Ways*. The majority of Chinese writers agree that most conventional understandings of the self are radically mistaken. This mistake is a result of a wider delusion which our everyday experience of the world passes upon us. Thus, according to Chinese perspective, the self is not identical to a person, and is not a particular individual. The Western idea of self, in that matter, loses sight of any genuine nature. Kingston’s book is an attempt to overcome the illusion of individuality to show that all human experiences are not only transitory, but also combined. The way she structures her text that allows the narrator to gracefully shift personas to claim this composite-type of self. Characters and narrators are ready to come and go when conditions are sufficient. As combined, textual experiences of such narrators are shared by many individuals, and yet Kingston is telling her own story through the story of others. As a writer, she does not claim any particular authoritative “I.” As a narrator, her persona is constantly textualized in relations to her mother and

aunt. None of our Kingston's character's life experiences are fully individual, but rather collective. None of the components of their self consists of a single permanent self: neither their body that is subject to decay, nor their ideas, conceptions, beliefs, social statuses, or financial situations, since all those elements are transitory. Since human minds tend to organize things into wholes, however, Kingston helps the reader by positioning the narrator with the assistance of other major characters in order to help the reader identify characters as temporarily called into being individuals.

Kingston structures the text so as to de-emphasize individualism whether Chinese or American. Her story is not structured as a simple search for her place within the community and her family as a Chinese-American. The story of the protagonist is not just intertwined with the story of her mother and her aunt. Kingston's major narrator is experiencing textual empirical birth, life, death and rebirth in case of no name woman, since belief in reincarnation is a natural part of Chinese philosophical school of thought.

Each conventional self is extremely strongly connected to a name. It is not surprising, that Kingston, trying to depict the liquid nature of self uses the technique of no name in so many ways and even calls one whole chapter a No Name Woman. It is not only her aunt who has no name; her aunt's lover had no name either. Kingston interprets her mother's story in a new way. She narrates her aunt from a new perspective. She sees her aunt as a martyr.

She kept the man's name to herself throughout her labor and dying; she did not accuse him that he be punished with her. (11)

Kingston continues playing with the important Chinese cultural notion of name to explain the unity of each single existing individual within her family. She illustrates this idea by telling the reader the story of Maxine's returning back from the training she received from the Old People in the second chapter.

My mother put a pillow on the floor before the ancestors. "Kneel here," she said. "Now take off your shirt." I kneeled with my back to me parents, so none of us felt embarrassed. My mother washed my back as if I had left for only a day and were her baby yet. "We are going to carve revenge on your back," my father said. "We'll write our oaths and names."

(77)

With her family names carved on her back, Maxine would now reflect the ultimate light of her family self, carrying their names on her back, and telling their stories to the world.

There are some interesting allusions to revenge of Hamlet's father in *The Woman Warrior*. Kingston's aunt's t and Hamlet's father's spirits are both waiting to be avenged. By writing about her aunt, Kingston not only plays tribute to her aunt's memory, but textually re-lives a life for her. Although Kingston's mother forbid her daughter to tell the story to other people, Kingston still insists on writing this story and uses her imagination to up the detail and consider the condition about her aunt after she is abandoned by her family which her mother does not tell to her. Kingston's aunt drowns herself in the well and dies. In Chinese folk custom, a person will become a water-ghost if dying in the water. The water-ghost will find the best opportunity to find substitute to replace them as a ghost to reincarnate. The villagers are scared because they are afraid Kingston's aunt is

seeking a substitute. Kingston believes her aunt is hunting her. So Kingston devotes herself to write the story about her aunt's unfair treatment and tragedy. This twist in Kingston's autobiography alludes to Hamlet's father's ghost telling Hamlet that he is trapped by his younger brother. Hamlet's father hopes Hamlet can avenge for his death. Similarly Kingston is avenging her "liquid" familial self for the death of her aunt not with a sword, but with her pen.

My aunt haunts me – her ghost drawn to me because now, after fifty years of neglect, I alone devote pages of paper to her, though not origamied into houses and clothes. (16)

Chinese philosophical theories about the nature of self grow naturally from general philosophical questions. Chinese, as most non-Western philosophical traditions, are skeptical about rational argumentation, which in its turn is the basis for Western logic. Eastern schools of thought are not open to any kind of knowledge that is obtained in any other way than through personal experience. In other words, they hold that only what is accessible to our senses is real. For each of many Eastern philosophical schools attaining self-knowledge is an important part of self-realization and fulfilment. Yet those schools introduce the idea of self that is very different to the Western perspective. The self in Chinese philosophical writings is of an unborn and eternal character. Since it is eternal it cannot be produced or destroyed. The self is not an object. In the West people are taught to care about self-esteem, while in the East the conventional self is seen as an illusion. The self in the Western psychology is viewed as a function of the mind. What at the beginning may seem like a paradox is merely a linguistic misunderstanding or disagreement of definitions. The solid self, the way the West sees a conventional self is

understood by the Eastern philosopher as a temporary impermanent state of self it only exists when conditions are sufficient.

The differences between philosophical schools of self are reflected in the difference between autobiographical narrative perspectives. In Western philosophical tradition, this conventional type of self is also referred to as the empirical self, or the individual. Maturation occurs when an individual overcomes the confusion that the temporal and ever-changing self is permanent, and realizes that ultimately there are no such things as solid or constant individuals. There is only dependent co-origination. Everybody's life is interconnected. Everyone is who he or she is because of everybody else in his or her turn being who they are. In modern English these ideas are known as doctrines of mutual co-origination or dependent co-arising. Kingston builds upon this philosophical school when she chooses to narrate the story of her self through the story of other characters. The major narrator in this case acts from the position of the observer. She also lives her textual lives through the lives of other narrators. Her true textual self, due to this writing style, is non-self or a liquid self, a constantly changing self that permanently does not exist from a conventional perspective. This position contradicts the Western narrative autobiographical tradition that is preoccupied with individualism or empirical self.

Kingston challenges the genre of autobiography by problematizing its assumptions about the nature of the self. According to Bonnie Melchior, reading Kingston's text implies that "I" only exists paired with you. As opposed to Melchior's reading, a "liquid self" is not a product, but a process. Western culture is pre-occupied with the idea of self-making. In Western autobiographies, individuals only account for

themselves. Kingston is challenging not only the assumptions of the literary genre but the very assumptions of American culture. She challenges all traditional distinctions. She erases the borders between an oral and a written tradition, although doing so does not translate into the easy affirmation of the oral Chinese tradition in particular or Chinese culture in general. Kingston uses oral Chinese legends in order to accustom the reader to the notion of a liquid nature of self. In the story of Fa Mu Lan Kingston's major narrator achieves the a new narrative self by merging with the character of *The Woman Warrior*.

The swordsman and I are not so dissimilar. May my people understand the resemblance soon so that I can return to them. What we have in common are the words at our backs. The idioms for revenge are "report a crime" and "report it to five families." The reporting is the vengeance – not the beheading, not the gutting, but the words. And I have so many words – "chinks" words and "gook" words too – that they do not fin on my skin. (41)

The story of the Moon Orchard from the fourth chapter "At the Western Palace," proves the point that not every woman is either lucky or capable of becoming a warrior. For Kingston's advocacy to women's problems in society, *The Woman Warrior* is hailed by critics as an exemplar Asian American feminist autobiography. According to Lee, Kingston uses her autobiography to consciously create her own identity. She is discovering and creating her own voice. The metamorphosis from victim to victor is often seen by critics as a form of political subversion. But according to Lee, if her autobiography is contradictory, it cannot be subversive. The book, for Lee, is an attempt to re-enact the ancient Chinese legend of Fa Mu Lan. Marginalized in America because she is Chinese, and marginalized by the Chinese because she is a woman, Kingston

narrates two types of dislocations. She loses her sense of self because she neither knows how to fight nor whom she is defending.

In contrast to the legend, American life has become a disappointment for Maxine-the-character. Within the moral framework of the legend, villains are easily identifiable. But Maxine-the-character has difficulty applying this framework to the complexity of her family story.

*The Woman Warrior* is a story of textual co-arising rather than a linear performance of canonical characters. In other words, finding the true self for each individual character results in finding the true self for all of the characters. Kingston's characters can be heard only through relations and seen in relationships. Kingston as a writer, by emphasizing the social aspect of an individual, broadens the scope of self-narration to include constant negotiations with the other. Most literary critics, such as Leslie W. Rabine read Kingston's autobiography as a textual dichotomy between the East and the West. I, on the other hand, do not find dichotomy to be the crucial inscription of Kingston's text. Kingston narrates her autobiography in such a way that allows the reader to realize how the same stories that are presented in the text as examples of situations that limit Kingston are later used as the stories that empower Kingston. Kingston teaches the reader that every problem can be transformed into an opportunity. This is a very Chinese philosophical perspective. It reflects on the *Daodejing* and its theory of non-doing. At times, reflecting rather than reacting is something that brings a positive result faster. Examples from the text can be those stories that were told to Kingston by her mother as

warnings. Kingston must be a good girl for the sake of the family's reputation. It is ironic, that the very stories that were empowering Kingston were the same stories that were meant to limit her. The story of her aunt that could have put young Maxine down empowered her to pull herself together and to prove to herself that she is able not only to choose her future but to change her ancestral past as well. Kingston achieves this through writing the book.

Don't let your father know that I told you about your forgotten aunt. He denies her. 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!

It is true, that Kingston-the -character, like so many other immigrant children, must forge her identity between the two worlds that lack the kind of cultural intersections a new immigrant can anchor upon. Yet for Kingston the two cultures are the two sides of the same coin rather than the two opposites. Accepting the new culture, Kingston is very careful about keeping the old family tradition. The title of the book may be seen as such a metaphorical anchor that represents the survival of Chinese ethnicity and culture in a new land. At the beginning of Kingston's textual life story, neither of these worlds completely accepts her. She must deal with traditional customs of the Chinese heritage as well as with the more liberal American culture, yet Kingston's story is the story of recovery through the writing.

Kingston is able to transform her social difficulties into a literary success. Both as a writer and as a narrator, she works her way from being speechless English as a Second

Language student to an eloquent American writer. She conquers the destructive weapon of tradition not by fighting it, but by utilizing its creative elements. Kingston achieves the victory through her narrative when she chooses not to repeat conventional patterns of self-narrative. She does not inscribe herself in the quest of becoming a true American, but by silencing her inner self to listen to and hear a distinctive voice of a multi-generational self.

The major dragon Maxine-the-warrior had to fight in Kingston's story was the dragon of misunderstanding with her mother. Kingston chooses to narrate the struggle with the dragon that is speaking "another tongue." Maxine conquered the dragon not by fighting any of the cultures, but by translating each one with words. She discovered her power in articulation, in the ability to speak and write. Similar to that of other female autobiography writers, Kingston's pen has become her sword and her means of finding a voice. As Watson notices, women have traditionally written their lives differently from men in form and substance. Lisa Shawn Hogan, in her *Politics of Feminist Autobiographies*, claims that women's autobiographies go beyond telling the story to create a future.

Modern literary criticism perspective on feminism is similar to that of race and sexual orientation. The scholars look at the concepts of race and gender through the lenses of identity. There are many views present in the scholarly dialogue: would a person rather be accepted, respected, and thus identified as the representative of a particular minority group, or would the person rather experience being a part of the mainstream? Another consideration modern critics address is whether or not identity exist? Critics agree that the concept of identity exists, but many rather view it as a

construct. Kingston's perspective differs from both approaches. Hers is built upon the Non-Western philosophical school of thought. She denies dichotomy even making such concepts as existence and non-existence. These concepts, similarly to yin-yang, are of liquid nature. Existence is present in non-existence as potentiality. Both are conditioned. It can be argued that Taoism provides metaphysical basis for social and political feminism. Thus, Kingston may be viewed as a feminist. Conventionally I would agree with such a statement. Yet from a metaphysical perspective, she is rather on the other side of the spectrum, which might seem closer to that of deconstruction.

Kingston accepts the dual challenge as a woman and as a Chinese to narrate the future of the whole tribe of both ethnic and gender minorities in literature. Scholars Sangeeta Jhajharia and Mamta Beniwal notice that American literature could have excluded Kingston for the English as a Second Language if she chose to write in the dominant mode, if she resisted to the fact that she was Chinese. Kingston-the-writer follows the teaching of the *Daodejing* about non-resistance. According to the philosophy of Dao, at times wisdom lays in waiting and observing the situation rather than reacting. It also teaches to accept reality the way it is in order to win rather than fight with it: "The Way does nothing yet nothing is left undone."(*The Daodejing*, 180)Kingston never directly refers to *Daodejing*, yet her narrative alludes to such ideas of the *Daodejing* as Wu-way, for example, or acceptance. Acceptance leads to transformation, and fight leads to tension. Rather than fighting with the fact the English is not her first language, Kingston chose to embrace her linguistic reality and to write in the mode that reflected her own cultural legacy. Regardless of the fact that she mastered Standard English, she

never claimed English as her first language. She finds her true self as a writer through peaceful non-resistance.

She structures her autobiographical narrative as to situate herself in a new home of her dual nation. Kingston views her life through Chinese oral tradition. Portraying herself as a warrior, Kingston feels a protector of her national legacy. Kingston's story re-narrates her whole nation. To be able to speak about the people who live a certain tradition, one must be able to speak the language of the tradition. The story of every nation is a story of a coming into being as a people. Nations, as well as people, merge into identities through narrative, language, text, and discourse. Kingston writes the study of nation through her shifting narration.

Kingston's allusion to the philosophy of "non-doing" that Daoism is teaching can be found in Kingston's textual forms and techniques. Maxine-the-narrator does not fight with the linguistic difficulties she experienced as a child. Kingston as a writer allows her characters to accept and transcend the difficulties connected to being unable to express themselves in English. Kingston narrates her liquid self with the help of linguistic imagery. In the second chapter, Kingston imagines that reincarnated self of her grandmother is present in Kingston in the form of a letter.

When I dream that I am wire without flesh, there is a letter of blue  
airmail paper that floats above the night ocean between here and China.

It must arrive or else my grandmother and I will lose each other. (50)

In Maxine-the-warrior, Kingston creates a character ready to accept linguistic challenges in the most ancient way of non-doing, as expressed in *The Daodejing*. The narrator

chooses no resistance and that allows her to win without a fight. There is no need for the narrator to be afraid of the savages when she speaks with them the same language.

Ultimately, Kingston is able to create a narrative that is rich in both Chinese heritage and American culture. She allows her persona to reconcile with both her new and old culture as well as with her own mother and find a deeper sense of belonging.

Kingston-the narrator attempts to transcend the notion of culture as much as the notion of an individual. She breaks the barriers of the idea of a permanent and solid self. In her autobiography, Kingston becomes the continuation of her other narrating selves. She is re-telling their lives and their stories. Kingston narrates her life story through a multi-generational narrative. Her mother's story, for that purpose, becomes her own.

Here is a story my mother told me, not when I was young, but recently,  
when I told her I also talk story. The beginning is hers, the ending, mine.  
(206)

“Liquidity” of an individual self is not presented only through depicting of Kingston's family. The Old People that trained Maxine-the Warrior in the second chapter are also used to illustrate the notion of ancestral connection between family members. When Maxine picks the young warrior for her army, he mysteriously resembles the Old Man himself.

A young man stepped out of the crowd. He looked familiar to me,  
as if he were the old man's son, or the old man himself when you looked  
at him from the corners of your eyes. (84)

This passage can be read as a hint about reincarnation. No Name Woman may also be read as reincarnation of Maxine herself. Although my theory of “liquid self” does not require reincarnation of individuals, reincarnation is a helpful illustration of the liquidity of self, and is often used by Kingston as a motif. The “liquid” nature of self allows Maxine to see her father and mother in her own reflection.

At first I saw only water so clear it magnified the fibers in the walls on the ground. On the surface, I saw only my own reflection. The old man encircled the neck of the gourd with his thumb and index figure and gave it a shake. As the water shook, then settled, the colors and lights shimmered into a picture, not reflecting anything I could see around me. There at the bottom of the gourd were my mother and father scanning the sky, which was where I was. (22)

When the Old Woman from the chapter White Tiger explains to Maxine that she can avenge her village, the phrase resonates very strongly with avenging her mother’s and father’s village in China, and especially avenging the aunt, and rescuing everything the angry villagers stole from them. In the chapter No Name Woman Maxine retells her mother’s story of humiliation using these words:

They overturned the great waist-high earthenware jugs; duck eggs, pickled fruits, vegetables burst out and mixed in acrid torrents. When they left, they took sugar and oranges to bless themselves. Some of them took bowls that were not broken and clothes that were not torn. (5)

In chapter one, the villagers humiliated Maxine's family, yet in chapter two The Old Woman suggests that it is Maxine's own village that needs to be avenged. "You can avenge your village," said the Old Woman. "You can recapture the harvests the thieves have taken." (23) The "liquid self" textualized in these two passages is the avenged and the avenger at the same time.

Instead of building a permanent self in the tradition of Western conventional autobiographical narrative, Kingston negates the whole notion of self, as well as the notion of the other. She narrates the opposite cultures with no tension and no resistance towards anyone. She lives a textual life of liquid narrative self through the stories of her character-narrators in order to fulfil her autobiographical quest of finding the universal nature of the liquid self.

## **Chapter V**

### **Kingston's Narrative Technique of a Listening Self**

This chapter will reflect upon Kingston's narrative techniques. Writing is often seen as a means of communication with others. The writing of a "liquid self" requires an act of listening to all the characters. Listening for the "liquid self" becomes a means of communicating with oneself. In case of autobiographies this mode of writing can be very therapeutic. For Kingston, her autobiographical narrative is a quest to find her ultimate self through listening to her various narrative selves. Thus, her writing becomes more listening than talking. Kingston's narration depicts Maxine listening to the stories of other characters; Kingston participates in the sufferings of her ancestors. Sufferings of her characters reflect the sufferings of the whole world. Discrimination and alienation, misunderstanding, and poverty, pain, and abuse cause much of suffering in her story. Kingston as a narrator is motivated to do something to help her characters by listening to their stories very deeply. In traditional Chinese culture it is not appropriate to talk about suffering because it may cause unpleasant feelings. Yet in the Western tradition

understandings suffering is seen as a step to compassion. It is also generally accepted in the West that narrating suffering can be very therapeutic for a person who lived through a tragic event. Kingston embraces the sufferings of her ancestors by listening to them and re-narrating their stories.

Kingston's autobiography does not concentrate on her own self. Unlike Franklin's notion of a self-made man, Kingston's sense of self is not only conditioned by her own will to become this or that, but by the condition of her all family. Her narrating style is not linear. The past, for Kingston, is as indefinite as the future. Her narrator does not trace the consistent growth of the protagonist towards the better future and understanding of self. She collects scenes of earlier events and retells stories and incidents. This narrative technique goes hand in hand with reinforcing the concept of a liquid self. Kingston listens to the stories of her various selves, observes their past lives in order to finally realize the ultimate nature of the "liquid self" that transcends time.

Unlike Benjamin Franklin, and other representatives of conventional American autobiographical genre, Kingston does away with any hierarchy in her writing. The "I" in her text does not situate itself first. The writing paradoxically becomes of the other as much as of the self. The narration in this case becomes that of quest outside the self rather than the more traditional quest inside as an inner-journey of self-discovery. For Kingston, writing became first of all an act of listening to others, and seeing the world through their perspective. There is no single message in the text due to such plurality of meanings. Manzanias compares Franklin's narrative style to an isolated male hero account. However Kingston writes from a perspective of a hallway with many doors through which multiple selves appear and disappear according to the narrative necessity and changing conditions

of the text. The major narrator in such a situation exists only potentially and remains both unseen and unheard throughout the entire narrative process. The major narrator, as conventional writing style understands him or her, in case of Kingston's narrative resolves into a field that holds the individual narrative waves that stay active as long as an individual story requires; then those wave-narrators, too disappear into the vast self-less narrative field. Such field can be compared to a shelf that is empty by itself and serves only when it is utilized to hold the individual books. Books, according to this analogy, are unable to hold themselves without a support of the shelf, yet the shelf itself needs to remain empty in order to fulfill its purpose well. Kingston's narrative is very similar to such an empty shelf.

In order to depict her liquid self, Kingston uses a group of co-narrators or character-narrators. Her liquid self can only be depicted with the help of conventional individuals. To enable individual characters to perform in such a way as if they were all growing out of one stem, sharing the same narrative roots, the major narrator needs to remain behind the scene. From the perspective of the description of such unconventional narrative self, the description is never finished and will continue constantly developing and constantly changing as long as the text exists. The task of finding self in Kingston's book is not a destination, but a journey. Marazanas believes that Kingston's discursive self is never complete or finished. I understand Kingston's self a bit differently. All her individual character-narrators are complete and finished in any moment of the story for at least two narrative reasons. First of all, in a non-linear text each character lives only in the moment of actual narration, but that moment is constructed in such a way that all the previous stories and all the discourses yet to be narrated are fully present in each and

every moment of the narration. “Liquid self” can be found in any chapter, and be fully enjoyed and understood, without the need of knowing what had happened before. The second reason Kingston’s narrative-characters are wholly complete is that the structure of the text itself suggests that all the narrators are the incarnation of one and the same major self-narrator, even though often unheard and unseen by the reader. All of them share one contextual memory. Kingston’s characters struggle to realize that the past can be changed. The “liquid selves” of Kingston’s ancestors did not go extinct with the death of their physical bodies. They evaporated into the family story only to wait until the conditions are proper for them to precipitate into Maxine’s imagination and to finally get restored to life through Kingston’s narration of their stories.

Geoffrey Harpham compares Kingston’s self to the game of mirrors. Such a self is more aware of differences than similarities within the notion of self. Manzanias shares Harpham’s position, calling Kingston’s selves copies of the original. The approaches of Harpham and Manzanias are extremely interesting. Yet I see a transformation of self in her text rather than copying or cloning. If we look at the cloud in the sky and see it becoming rain the next day, would we be able to notice the same cloud in the rain? Can the rain be called a cloud and is the rain and the cloud the same identity or two different ones? The answer depends on our perspective. Conventionally, the cloud and the rain can be seen and called either the same or different until we realize that in fact they are neither the same nor different. Similarly in Kingston’s text it is easier to explain her narrative selves in the terms of what they are not rather of what they are.

It should not be hard for the reader to see a continuation of the mother in the daughter. Modern Disney movies such as *The Lion King*, for example have well used this

technique, based on Eastern philosophy, of seeing the father in the son. Similarly, Maxine saw her mother and father in her own reflection. There is no original or copy in the continuation between the mother and the daughter. There is only the constant textual kaleidoscope of transformative narrative in which each narrator is the wholly original self in the content, regardless of the name and the form. In the chapter Shaman, Kingston writes about her mother how she looks “through” Maxine to see her grandchildren:

She looks younger than I do, her eyebrows are thicker, her lips fuller. Her naturally curly hair is parted on the left, one wavy wisp tendrilling off to the right. She wears a scholar’s white gown, and she is not thinking about her appearance. She stares straight ahead as if she could see me and past me to her grandchildren. (58)

The difference between a conventional autobiographical genre and Kingston’s writing is that in the conventional genre the text is structured as a retelling narrative with a narrator and the character, regardless of the fact that they both represent the only one present narrative self, who is looking at the story through two different perspectives.

Conventional autobiographical narrative is a set of past events, while narrating a liquid self allows the author to participate in the living never-ending story. The narrating self, in such cases, is a more mature self than the character. The narrating self is capable of approving and disapproving the actions of the character self, due to the position that he or she holds in comparison to the less mature self of a character. In Franklin’s autobiography, this literary technique is used throughout the text and is vividly present at his famous “errata” interpretation of his earlier mistakes in life that could and were corrected later in the textual life story. Based on the example of Franklin’s

autobiography, we can argue that writers of conventional autobiographies do not follow their own rules. The writing self has already fulfilled his narrative destination before even starting it, since at the very beginning of such narrative the reader usually meets the voice of the same narrator as he or she would leave at the end of the book. Conventional autobiographical narratives do not really allow the narrator to develop throughout the story, but only recollect the past events and the past development of the narrated self. In contrast, Kingston's textual structure allows her narrating self to pass through developmental stages within the text and outside of it.

Kingston's narrative style differs significantly from that of more traditional autobiographical narrations. The book is fragmented. It explores experiences of Kingston's ancestors and family, sharing their sufferings. The text is not structured in a lineal chronological manner. Kingston's narratological features allow her major narrator to listen to the stories told by other character-narrators in order to later re-tell and re-interpret them over and over again to herself and to the reader.

## **Chapter VI**

### **Transforming the Rhetoric**

This chapter will investigate how the notion of silence in the book becomes a narratological tool for narrating the “liquid self.” Unlike traditional Western autobiographies, which tend to proclaim ones’ individual-self loud and clear, writing for Kingston is the way of silent listening to the other’s voices. For Kingston, silence becomes a narrative mode that vibrates the non-verbal and non-conceptual universal stories of her individual past selves. Another meaning of silence in Kingston’s narrative may be the silence of illegal Chinese immigrants-family members of Kingston. The silence is a constant theme that appears in every chapter of Kingston’s autobiography. The silence appears to be the part of identity of every Chinese child. Silence can also be understood as a narrative technique of a non-self that does not exist independently, but only through the narrative of others.

As much as life itself, text is full of potentiality. Narratological silence is possible due to the very nature of language that contains undisclosed information. The question can be raised as to what triggers the detour from narratological silence to rhetoric. In

order to liberate something, one must let go of it. Kingston in her attempt to liberate her writing starts by drifting into the unwritten. The shift from silence back to rhetoric is triggered by discontent of the writer with the results of the rhetoric of the previous character. It is very much like *разноречие* and Eastern semiotics. Kingston is writing from the silence. Yet once verbalized, her cognition becomes encoded. So, as a writer, Kingston gives consideration to narratological detours in order to re-shape the previous narratological content. She implicitly espouses the Eastern school of semiotics which is very much like deconstruction: defining by exclusion. The liquid self is silent by definition. Kingston can verbalize it by voicing other characters into existence. Since other characters lack independent self existence, the liquid self is bound to perform them. Aware of the nature of language, Kingston works as an artist who uses her eraser as much as her pen.

Kingston's biggest contribution to the story of "*No Name Woman*" is offering a voice for the silenced Asian women. Usually in non-Western philosophical and literary traditions, the notion of silence bears strictly positive connotations of emptiness and freedom from sounds that are often associated with an obstacle to concentration. Kingston through her text attempts to illustrate both Eastern and Western perspective of silence. Silence in Western minds is usually associated with the absence of story-telling. Yet for Kingston voice is not necessarily an antonym of silence. Theoretically, the idea of active listening and meaningful silence is not new in critical theory. In the second half of the twentieth century the idea was developed into the theory of discourse.

The Western perspective of voice-silence relationship is well represented in the Biblical approach of the Gospel of John: "At the beginning was the Word..." It is also

well reflected in the position of the Greek philosophers with their passion towards Logos. Hardly any other culture can be found that puts Word on such a highly privileged pedestal. The creative power of language is also agreed upon throughout both Eastern and Western schools of semiotics. The difference between their approaches lay strictly in the concepts of epistemology and cognition. Western political both capitalist and Marxist representatives have contributed significantly to a dialogue about silence-voice dynamics. Such political topics as the silencing of the working class and racial or gender minorities; the freedom of speech and the right to remain silent; the famous slogan “no taxation without representation” also allude to the importance of being politically heard. A positive aspect of silence can be found in the monastic practices, yet we can see the roots of these in the Eastern meditative practices.

Jacques Lacan wrote that symbolic organization is limited. It makes certain objects of discourse not particularly seen within a discursive structure. By bringing a silencing technique into her autobiography, Kingston allows her reader to complete the story for the narrator. In Lacan’s linguistic theory, voice is the remnant of signification. Every narrative as an act is engaged in views and positions. Any textualized reality is detached from a particular life situation. This type of reality is reproducible and timeless. The story of “No Woman” is a circulated discourse through silence. While everybody in the village believes that he or she knows and understands the story, the shared silence results in misinterpretation. From Lacanian perspective, silencing this case allows of creation of new signification or meaning-production. Merleau-Ponty teaches that if writers want to understand language in its original mode of signifying they have to pretend they have never spoken. Kingston proposes the reader to look at the language

from a position of a mute person. She compares the art of language with other means of expression. Kingston allows her main character to actively listen while other characters narrate her stories. Kingston depicts this listening by later allowing Maxine to re-write and re-interpret other character's narrations. Employing the technique of active listening, Kingston recognizes what many Chinese people knew what her mother expressed in the passing of the story of her aunt, namely, that the foundation of community is based on the recognition of the etiquette of silence. It opens to her narrators and the readers alike the space of potentially non-verbal interpretational and narrative discourse.

Kingston attempts to perform the reduction of narration in her story, leading the reader back to what it signifies. The villagers intended to banish the woman into forgetfulness, to erase her entire existence. By pointing to her story, Kingston revives her aunt back to life. But Kingston does not just re-tell her mother's story. She fills in the gaps of her mother's story. Maxine does not espouse her mother's interpretation of the story. For Maxine's mother, her aunt's behavior brought crisis to the village. Kingston allows the facts to speak for themselves. They tell the reader about the severe punishment of the aunt was a result of the crisis that the villagers found themselves at the time of the story. Silence is not just a special narrative technique in Kingston's life story that appears in every chapter of the book; it is also a constant theme. This theme has multiple layers of implication. Kingston describes the silence of her relatives and friends as well as her own silence as a young immigrant girl. Description of the majority of the Chinese as mute is often read politically. The whole Chinese American community of the early immigration to the USA experienced compulsory political silence. Also the narrative techniques of telling the story for other women suggest their inability to speak for themselves. The

liquid self speaks for and listens to all women of Kingston's family, as well as for all the women that could not express themselves with words. Their silence embedded in the book articulates the misogynistic ideology behind Chinese culture but also the racism Chinese immigrants experienced in their new home.

Another explanation of why Kingston is telling the reader the story of many silent women would be that she follows the narrative tradition of ethnic literature that often voices entire groups and communities rather than individual selves. The tradition goes back to the notion of a communal voice over an individual voice. This is true in regards to Kingston's narrative, yet does not answer the question why most of the characters in her story are silenced. The silence in this case signifies not just the legal discrimination of early Chinese Americans, but also Kingston's ethnic literary background. Jade Snow Wong believes that Kingston's life story has an important value from an authentic ethnic writing perspective.

Silence is often seen by westerners as timid or shrewd, if not hostile. Asian American men are often feminized in canonical literature. Such attitudes also color the reading of Kingston's autobiography. Silence can be imposed on the family to maintain dignity either by the ethnic community or by the dominant culture as well. For Kingston, this silence was reflected in her early childhood selective mutism.

My Silence was thickest – total – during the three years that I covered my school paintings with black paint... layers of black covered houses and flowers and suns. (149) Kingston experienced early childhood trauma due to her inability to speak freely at school. Unfortunately silence is very seldom read as a part of culture. In

Asian culture silence is etiquette, but in Asian etiquette silence is more than politeness. It is almost a ritual. It means knowing one's social position. To speak out of turn, for the Asians is disrespectful, thus Kingston's narrators show respect to the narrative rhythm of the fixed yet fluid boundaries of social differences reflected in the text.

Kingston's voicing other people offers a dilemma. Would Chinese people try to "capture" her voice "for their own use?" Kingston senses that her family is depended on her to speak for them. Having been served as an interpreter for the family of the new immigrant that did not speak English well enough for themselves, she experienced the pressure of not being able to tone down, change or omit what others want her to say. As an interpreter, Maxine must have been able to separate herself from the words she translated. Yet for a child, it was not easy to do that, and often felt very embarrassed for her family. *The Woman Warrior* is a nurturing narration, and Kingston choses this technique to reconcile Maxine with her family.

Another reason for silencing the Chinese family in the story would be the need to illustrate a veil of secrecy that was hanging over her own household at that time. Her own parents came to the United States when Chinese immigration was illegal. Many Chinese Americans at that time kept a code of silence. For Kingston, writing the story about herself becomes a mode of healing the past for herself and for her family.

Silence is crucial to Kingston's autobiography. The reader does not always hear the voice of the major narrator who represents the notion of a non-self, voicing others and yet remaining free from any voice of her own. Through silencing her major narrator, Kingston is searching for her narratological self. According to Chinese etiquette, before verbalizing her own side of story, Kingston allows other characters to speak.

## **Chapter VII**

### **Conclusion**

How is it possible that a writer can suddenly become now this character, and now that one? Kingston answers this question by creating an innovative narrative technique for her autobiography. She tells and retells her story from contradictory accounts as interplay of meta-narrators. Every narrative account allows different interpretational possibilities. The in-between position of a narrative field that the major narrator is performing opens the door to interpretational ambiguity. Kingston keeps her readers uncertain about the text in terms of structure and narrative coherence. Kingston's narrative autobiographical technique puts the whole notion of self into question. Kingston does not choose this narrative perspective because, as some critics assert, she cannot identify which "I" she is. She narrates her life story from a perspective of a liquid self in order to enable the reader to look at her book from combined human experiences.

Her narrator voices silent women-co-narrators whose textual nature is constantly changing and unstable. Kingston's narrative is a story of recovery of silenced English as a Second Language first generation Chinese American into a success. She conquered the destructive weapon of silencing culture by utilizing and re-creating its narrative story-

telling techniques. Compared to other minority writers, Kingston never openly criticizes the “other,” but overcomes the illusion of domination by erasing the boundaries between the dichotomous perspectives. In her text Kingston functions as an oppressed and as an oppressor sometimes bullying the classmates with selective mutism. She functions as an oppressed female narrator and as the defender of females at the same time. Although Kingston proposes an alternative to Western individualism, she never fights with it. Unlike many other Chinese-American writers, Kingston resorts to Chinese cultural tradition for inspiration. Kingston’s autobiography is often read by female critics as an exposure of misogyny in Chinese culture. Some of such critics do not always acknowledge that both Western and Eastern cultures oppressed Chinese women.

Throughout the book, Kingston narrates and re-narrates stories, thus allowing the reader to see these stories from different perspectives. Re-telling many of her mother’s stories, Kingston often interprets them differently. Many narrative paradoxes allow Kingston to present a silenced “No Name Woman” as a rebel rather than just an oppressed. Kingston re-situates her work in relation to both American and Asian American literature. Kingston does not re-write Chinese American women from the perspective of many individual selves. She establishes a communal self and tells the story of that self through the stories of many. Her new narrative tradition of the revision of self and the construction of a different form of subjectivity does away with textual hierarchy. Since there is no chapter that is dedicated to the traditional self as the western reader is used to understand it, Kingston’s autobiography may be seen as a partially fictional narration. Although in many aspects Kingston’s writing is similar to contemporary American race and gender minorities’ autobiographies, as opposed to the dominant

conventional narrative discourse of self, Kingston narrative lacks the dichotomy between the self and the other and leans towards textually accepting both narrative perspective as valid. Kingston creates a text that empowers women with new voices. Critics argue why she does it: whether it is because Chinese culture silences women or because American culture silences people of different races or both. Kingston's depiction of the liquid textual nature of self answers this question in other terms that exclude the need to oppose the self to the other.

Kingston succeeds to create her life and her text that are both rich in Chinese and American cultural heritages without any trace of dichotomy that is usually present in the text of minority writers. This narrative style positions her as different from both conventional as well as minority writer, not necessarily excluding her from various categories. Kingston's "liquid self" interrogates the illusion of Western individuality. Her book is structured in such a way as to show the reader that all human experiences are not only transitory, but also combined regardless of race, gender or social standing of the self. Kingston gracefully shifts persons to claim this composite-type of self. As transitory, characters and narrators are ready to come when narrative conditions are sufficient, and go when such conditions are no longer there. As combined, textual experiences are shared by many individual character-narrators. Kingston is telling her own story through voicing the stories of others. Although as a writer, she does not claim any particular authoritative "I," as a narrator, Kingston's persona is constantly textualized in relations to her mother and aunt. None of her life experiences are fully individual, but rather collective. Not a single component of their self consists of a candidate to a permanent self. Yet since human minds tend to organize things into wholes, Kingston

helps the reader by positioning the major narrator with the assistance of other multiple narrating characters in order to help the reader identify all characters as temporarily called into being individuals. Kingston's expansion of the traditional frames of self-narrative serves as field in which she accomplishes her quest for what I call "liquid self", the stories of other women from her past life.

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