

# An Analysis of Character Trauma in *The Woman Warrior* from the Perspective of Trauma Theory

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## Abstract

**Maxine Hong Kingston is the first Chinese-American to win the National Book Award. As one of Maxine Hong Kingston's representative works, *The Woman Warrior* mainly reflects the first and second generation Chinese female immigrants' confusion and choices about their ethnic identities, as well as Maxine Hong Kingston's profound reflections on the patriarchal society. This thesis examines the signs of two female characters in *The Woman Warrior* from the standpoint of trauma theory, emphasizing the significance of traumatic experiences for education.**

## Keywords

**The Woman Warrior, trauma theory, trauma symptom, Maxine Hong Kingston.**

## 1. Introduction

*The Woman Warrior*, a masterpiece by Chinese American writer Maxine Hong Kingston, was published in 1976 and is regarded as a landmark work in Chinese American literature. With its unique narrative style and deep cultural insight, this work creates a new paradigm in American minority literature. There are five main stories in the book, all of which are about Chinese-American women's life experiences between the two cultures of China and the United States. These women have to deal with both the traditional Chinese demands on women and the new American environment. The most unusual aspect of the book is the way the stories are told. The author writes a combination of Chinese stories told by her mother and her own experiences in America. In this way, she expresses the process of Chinese-American women finding themselves in two cultures. The book was very popular after it was published and won many important awards. It is now often used in classes in American universities to discuss immigration, women and culture. Many later writers of Chinese descent were influenced by this book.

As a representative work of Chinese-American author Maxine Hong Kingston, *The Woman Warrior* is deeply influenced by the author's experiences in the United States. This work breaks the boundaries of traditional literary genres with its unique narrative style. It is neither pure biographical literature nor a completely fictionalized novel, but skillfully blends the elements of true historical narrative and artistic imagination to form a cross-border literary expression. The novel consists of five interrelated and independent narrative units, building a multi-voiced female narrative space. Scholars have studied this work from a variety of perspectives, mainly focusing on three dimensions: first, the exploration of Chinese women's subjectivity from a feminist perspective; second, the issue of cultural negotiation in the process of immigrant identity construction; and third, the conflict and adaptation in the collision of Eastern and Western cultures. However, there is an obvious gap in the existing research. Fewer scholars have systematically paid attention to the core theme that the five story units jointly reveal: namely, the psychological trauma that Chinese-American female immigrants endure and their journey of resistance in the East-West cultural differences.

Maxine Hong Kingston vividly presents a series of traumatized female characters in front of readers through a highly tense literary technique. These characters not only carry the painful memories of individuals, but also reflect the plight of the entire Chinese immigrant community in a heterogeneous cultural environment. The recurring images of ghosts and traumatic memories in the work actually constitute a powerful indictment of racial discrimination and cultural prejudice, and at the same time reveal the author's own mental trauma in the bicultural gap. It is particularly noteworthy that the female characters in the novel are subjected to double oppression: on the one hand, they come from traditional cultural gender discipline, and on the other hand, they originate from racial discrimination in American society. The trauma takes on complex forms in the narrative. The artistic reconstruction of traumatic memories through literary imagination not only realizes the narrative healing of trauma, but also conveys an important historical lesson to readers: the recognition and reflection of immigrants' traumatic experiences are indispensable to the construction of a multicultural society.

Felman declaims that "the twentieth century, an era of historic trails, was in effect a century of traumas and (concurrently) a century of theories of trauma" [1]. Trauma theory plays an important role in the field of literature. Therefore studying the traumatic experiences of characters is crucial to understanding the novel. The literary value of *The Woman Warrior* lies not only in the fact that it creates a new paradigm in Chinese American literature, but also in the fact that it realizes the creative transformation of cultural trauma through literary form. Maxine Hong Kingston sublimates her personal painful experience into an artistic expression of universal significance, providing an exemplary textual practice of how ethnic minority literature deals with traumatic memories. The work ultimately reveals to us that only by facing up to historical trauma can we realize true cultural reconciliation and identity reconstruction.

## 2. The Traumatic Experience of No Name Woman

Judith Herman proposes her own views on trauma, namely "Psychological trauma is an affliction of the powerless. At the moment of trauma, the victim is rendered helpless by overwhelming force. When the force is that of nature, we speak of disasters. When the force is that of other human beings, we speak of atrocities. Traumatic events overwhelm the ordinary systems of care that give people a sense of control, connection, and meaning" [2]. According to Herman, the unique quality of traumatic experiences is that they happen more frequently than most people can adjust to life. After analyzing several traumatic occurrences, Herman comes to the conclusion that the fundamental characteristic of traumatic events is that they lead a person to lose their sense of self, autonomy, humanity, and relationships with other people and the outside world.

When Maxine grows up and wants to break free from her parents, the first thing she thinks of is to rewrite the story of No Name Woman, giving her story new meanings. Hegel says "what Spirit really strives for is the realization of its Ideal Being; but in doing so, it hides that goal from its own vision, and is proud and well satisfied in this alienation from it." [3]. Maxine's mother tells her the aunt's story in the first chapter of *The Woman Warrior* and she tells Maxine, "Don't humiliate us" as a warning [4]. The aunt's name does not appear throughout the talk, so she is referred to by me as the "No Name Woman". Several years after her husband travels across the ocean to the United States, the unnamed aunt commits adultery and became pregnant. The village people know this is a disgrace, strongly condemning the aunt's adultery. When the aunt is in labor, they break into her home and wreak havoc to vent their discontent. Early the next morning, Maxine's mother is fetching water from the well when she discovers the bodies of No Name Woman and her baby in the well. Having endured so much blame from the villagers, No Name Woman is so traumatized that she was forced to throw herself into the well, which casts a heavy shadow over our family. Since then, the whole family treats her as if she had never been

born and regards her as ghost. In the eyes of Maxine's mother, No Name Woman is a woman with no shame.

Maxine's mother repeatedly warns her not to tell anyone about this. Maxine's mother explains to her the No Name Woman's story, pointing out that she has been severely punished for breaking social norms. Her mother tells Maxine that her aunt is a bad role model. Maxine, like them, therefore participates in No Name Woman's punishment by remaining silent. In her mother's narrative, the story of the unnamed aunt is an immoral play in which the aunt is seduced by lust and unable to maintain her morality and chastity.

It can be inferred that No Name Woman has lost the ability to resist or even express herself as a result of the prolonged period of sexual and emotional abuse. She knows that no one would believe her even if she clearly states how she is raped and how she suffers the consequences of the rape. The villagers and her family only care about the fact that she is pregnant. They never care about the cause of the pregnancy. In this case, no matter what she does, the result would be the same. The No Name Woman's voice is silenced by the patriarchal society, making it hard for her to speak the truth.

### 3. The Traumatic Experience of Moon Orchid

The female characters' hysteria in *The Woman Warrior* is also one of forms of traumas. The Morbid Writing is a common topic in American minority literature, especially in Chinese literature. It demonstrates the difficult situation of the underprivileged and fulfills the imagination of the American society about the Chinese American Women. According to Susan Sontag, the figure of the madwoman in the works of female writers represents the writers themselves, showing the anxiety of female writers about their identity in a male-dominated literary tradition. The figure of the mad woman is a unique phenomenon in the Western literary tradition. Through the metaphors behind madness, the reasons for the morbid writing and the motives of the writers can be revealed.

The fourth chapter of *The Woman Warrior* tells a story of Moon Orchid. Aunt Moon Orchid, a traditional Chinese woman, has been living alone for thirty years and is grateful to her husband, who regularly sends her money from the United States. Moon Orchid finds out that her husband has another white wife in the US after journeying all the way to the country with her family's assistance to locate him. Moon Orchid's request is rejected by her husband on the grounds that she can not speak English. She is not suitable to be a housewife to help him with his hospitality, which completely destroys Moon Orchid's self-esteem and hope.

Freud says that "It is of course obvious that in cases of 'traumatic' hysteria what provokes the symptoms is the accident" [5]. Moon Orchid has internalized the patriarchal norms and lost her independence. Without the spiritual support of her husband, Moon Orchid feels a growing sense of loneliness. Worried about being spied on, she secludes herself in her house and begins to suffer from mental disorders, hallucinating that she is being persecuted by Americans. "You don't understand English words'. 'This time, miraculously, I understood, I decoded their speech.'" [4]. Eventually, her family have no choice but to send her to an asylum. Moon Orchid's visions of Americans are the result of her fear of Americans. This emotion has become part of her subconscious because it is American woman that causes her to lose her husband and the happy life she hopes for. Insanity is an outlet for Moon Orchid's pain. She builds a utopia for herself to escape from reality.

Aunt Moon Orchid represents those traditional Chinese women who have been abandoned by the times. She discovers that her husband has long since married another American wife and started a new family. This blow directly leads to her mental breakdown and eventually she is sent to a mental hospital. Moon Orchid's tragedy is not only a personal marital failure, but also a victim of the collision of two cultural values. Through Moon Orchid's story, the author

poignantly points out the gender inequality in the immigrant experience. Those wives who stay behind in China are often forgotten by their husbands, and when they finally come to the United States, they find themselves without a place in their husbands' new lives. Their ordeal reflects the power imbalance in transnational marriages and the double oppression faced by immigrant women. The character's tragic ending allows readers to reflect deeply on the gender politics of the immigrant experience and the brutal cost of the process of acculturation.

#### 4. Conclusion

In the realm of Asian literature, Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Warrior Woman* has always been a unique and fascinating work. The book skillfully intertwines and blends the author's real-life experiences with a fictional storyline, like a colorful yet scarred tapestry. The book portrays many characters who are trapped in the quagmire of pain, from the female elders who are forced to be silent to the immigrants who are struggling to survive in a foreign country, their stories are full of the hardships and helplessness of life. Through delicate strokes, the author constantly recalls those heart-wrenching past events, which clearly shows the deep marks left by historical trauma and social prejudice on the author's body and mind. In her book, the vividly portrayed female characters all live under the shadow of pain. Some women are deeply bound by traditional concepts. In the social environment of male superiority and female inferiority, they can only bury their thoughts and feelings deep in their hearts, unable to freely express their true selves; some women are discriminated against because of racial differences in unfamiliar countries. Their identities are in a state of confusion, and they struggle to survive in the cracks of cultural conflicts. These pains do not exist in isolation; they are deeply rooted in specific historical and cultural backgrounds and epitomize the collective pain experienced by the entire Asian community in the process of migration and integration.

What is more noteworthy is that *The Woman Warrior* is not just a memoir that tells of wounds and pains. Instead of staying in lamentation of the pain, Maxine Hong Kingston actively explores the path of self-healing between the lines with a spirit of resilience. While recalling her trauma, she also tries to break the silence and use words to find an exit for herself and all those who have experienced similar pain. This relentless pursuit of self-redemption fills the entire work with hope and strength. With sincerity and seriousness, the author records these stories one by one. She is not only recounting the past, but also conveying an important message to the readers: every painful experience has a unique value. These traumatic experiences are like mirrors that reflect society's problems and help us better understand ourselves. They are not only sad memories, but also valuable assets for social reflection and personal growth. Only by bravely facing up to these traumas and exploring the root causes behind them can we truly step out of the shadow of trauma and realize spiritual healing and growth.

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