

# *A Study of Trauma and Recovery in the Woman Warrior*

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**Abstract:** The debut novel of Chinese-American writer Maxine Hong Kingston, *The Woman Warrior*, describes the experience of second-generation Chinese immigrants, “I”, growing up in an environment where traditional Chinese culture and American culture are intertwined and collide. Trauma writing is an important feature of the novel, which is mainly reflected in the confusion of identity, the lack of individual security, and the struggles to fit into the mainstream society. The traumatized “I” was guided by my mother Brave Orchid and the traditional Chinese stories of Mulan and Cai Yan, which enabled “me” to gradually recover from trauma.

## 1. Introduction

Born in California in 1940, Chinese American writer Maxine Hong Kingston is considered “the most representative writer of the Chinese American literary boom” <sup>[1]</sup>. Her parents were first-generation Chinese immigrants to the United States, so Kingston received a formal American education on the one hand, and on the other hand accepted the Chinese cultural traditions inherited from her forefathers. Her works profoundly reflect the exchanges and collisions between Chinese and Western cultures. Kingston is one of the most powerful “feminist writers”, who “not only gives a voice to silenced anonymous women, but also makes women a model of morality, a warrior and a hero who is invincible in the face of battle” <sup>[2]</sup>. *The Woman Warrior*, the debut novel of her, caused a sensation in American literary establishment upon its publication and sparked fervent scholarly discourse. It won the National Book Critics Circle Award for Nonfiction that year and also enabled Asian writers to stand out in the history of American literature.

This novel, from the perspective of a young Chinese girl living in a foreign land, tells the different experiences of five women, including herself. It presents “the experiences of Chinese Americans changing themselves, adapting themselves and eventually becoming Chinese Americans in the cultural conflicts between China and the United States” <sup>[3]</sup>. The novel does not adopt the traditional linear narrative, but rather “freely navigates and intertwines between the past and the present, memory and the current, imagination and fact, myth and reality, narration and commentary, ‘my’ narration and my mother’s account” <sup>[4]</sup>. This paper will focus on the social integration trauma and recovery in *The Woman Warrior* to fill in new content for the study of Kingston’s works.

## 2. Trauma Writing

### 2.1. The Predicament of Cultural Aphasia

One of the common symptoms of trauma is “inner closure and refusal to communicate with others” <sup>[5]</sup>. As a second-generation Chinese immigrant born in the United States, “I” inevitably faced the clash between the cultural value orientations of China and the United States in the process of growing up. “Chinese-American family ethics is usually an extension of traditional Chinese ethics in foreign countries, which is family-centered and follows the vertical top-down bloodline ethics, while the American ethics focuses on the realization of individual values in the horizontal value ethics” <sup>[6]</sup>. This great difference in ethical norms leads “me” to doubt and confuse about the ownership of my own ethical identity. Caught between the two cultures, it became very difficult for me to speak. “I” didn’t know what to say or what language to use, so much so that “when I was in kindergarten and had to speak English for the first time, I became silent” <sup>[7]</sup>. During kindergarten years, “my silence was thickest” <sup>[7]</sup>. The result was that “I” flunked kindergarten. But I was not the only silent child in the kindergarten, “there were other quiet Chinese girls not of our family” <sup>[7]</sup>. This mass silence made me realize that “the silence had to do with being a Chinese girl” <sup>[7]</sup>. In the American school, “I” could not find my place and could not identify myself.

After American school, “we” went to Chinese school. However, not all of the children who were silent at American school found voice at Chinese school. My sister and I still remained silent here. Although my sister and “I” had memorized the lesson perfectly at home and checked each other, “I” still made a sound like “a crippled animal running on broken legs” when the new teacher asked us to recite in front of the class. And you could hear “splinters in my voice, bones rubbing jagged against one other” <sup>[7]</sup>. This cultural “aphasia” continued until I grew up. Even when it comes to seemingly commonplace daily interactions such as casually saying hello to someone, or asking something in front of the check-out counter, or asking a bus driver for directions, “a dumbness—a shame—still cracks my voice” <sup>[7]</sup>. That “spoils my day with self-disgust” <sup>[7]</sup>.

In addition, “I” became confused about the English words “I” and “here”. “‘I’ and ‘here’ imply ‘who am I’ and ‘where am I’ such questions. Hazily, the girl has realized that it is the question of identity that bothers her” <sup>[8]</sup>. Because “I” was confused about my identity, I could not answer the questions of “who am I” and “where am I”, And these questions have always accompanied the growth of Chinese immigrants like “me”.

### 2.2. The Intensification of Self-Loathing

“A secure sense of connection with caring people is the foundation of personality development. When this connection is shattered, the traumatized person loses her basic sense of self” <sup>[9]</sup>. As a result of being torn between two cultures, “I” gradually became anxious and confused about my bicultural identity and lost the most basic sense of security. One of the manifestations is that “I” began to reject the appearance and image of the East. “I” felt extreme disgust for my classmate’s quiet sister. “I hated her for her China doll hair cut”, and “I” also “looked into her face so I could hate it close up” <sup>[7]</sup>. All of these Chinese physical features annoy “me”. The dislike for this girl actually reflects “my” self-loathing. Behind this self-loathing is the lack of security in a heterogeneous cultural environment. “I hated fragility” and “I hated her weak neck”, so “I wanted a stout neck”, “tough skin” and “hard brown skin” <sup>[7]</sup>. I believe that being outwardly strong is an effective measure in establishing my sense of security in a foreign country.

In addition to this, “I” used violence against the silent girl in an attempt to get her to talk. “I” squeezed her cheeks and pulled the hair at her temple to force her to speak. “I” told her, “If you don’t talk, you can’t have a personality” <sup>[7]</sup>. However, after this event, “I” fell into self-reproach and

depression, and spent “eighteen months sick in bed with a mysterious illness” [7]. The silent girl and “I” are essentially the same: “we” both lack a sense of security in a foreign country. This girl is the same as me in the past. The “violence” towards the girl actually reflects “my” own aversion. Due to the lack of a sense of belonging and security in a heterogeneous cultural environment, “I” was eager to prove through some means that “I” also belong here and “I” am not the “other” in this culture. However, this approach once again deepens my self-loathing.

### 2.3. Difficulties in Integrating into Mainstream Society

Because they were born in the United States and studied Western culture since childhood, second-generation Chinese Americans naturally tend to accept the values of American culture. However, Western society has not accepted them, and they have consistently remained positioned as “the other” within mainstream culture, which often makes their hearts extremely anxious and even leads them to lose themselves. And “I” am no exception. The face of a Chinese American marks “me” as an outsider in the mainstream American society. “I” can’t find a sense of home in American society, but I can’t return to my parents’ homeland either. Therefore, I have been suffering mentally because I can’t integrate into the mainstream society.

The subtitle of the novel is “Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts”, and “ghosts” best describes the white society into which “I” could not fit. “American has been full of machines and ghosts” [7]. The world was so thick with ghosts that “I” could hardly walk or breathe. Furthermore, the traditional Chinese concepts of my parents’ generation have added difficulties for “me” to integrate into the mainstream society. For instance, when a delivery boy mistakenly delivered someone else’s medicine to “my” home, “my” mother regarded it as a revenge that would sicken “my” family. So, she asked “me” to go to the drugstore to “rectify their crime” in Chinese way- “swing stinky censers around the counter, at the druggist at the customers” and “throw dog blood on the druggist” [7]. This practice is completely contrary to the social rules of America, so “I” couldn’t stand her plans.

## 3. Recovery from Trauma

### 3.1. Strength Derived from Traditional Chinese Culture

“Storytelling is a very important and effective means of trauma therapy” [5]. China’s excellent traditional culture and traditional stories contain a lot of ancient wisdom and spiritual strength, which is helpful for healing psychological trauma. The story of Cai Yan gave “me” guidance and inspiration, helping “me” to re-examine my bicultural identity and greatly alleviating the pain of my social integration trauma, thus enabling “me” to better integrate into the mainstream society.

The poetess Cai Yan was captured by the Southern Hsiung-nu and stayed with the barbarians for twelve years. During the twelve years, she was unable to communicate with others due to the language difference. She tried to speak to her two children, but they didn’t understand and just “imitated her with senseless singsong words and laughed” [7]. It was not until she sang China and her family with the musical instrument of barbarians, that her children stopped laughing and eventually sang along. Although the words are Chinese, “the barbarians understood their sadness and anger” [7]. In the process of social integration, Cai found a path of reconciliation among different cultures in her own way, alleviating the pain caused by the trauma of social integration. Cai’s experience also inspired “me” to realize that “if we’re no longer attached to one piece of land, we belong to the planet” and that “Wherever we happen to standing, that spot belongs to us as any other spot” [7]. “I” attempted to provide a solution for Chinese immigrants in the predicament of survival, culture, and identity: affirming the excellent traditional Chinese culture and reconciling with American culture, accepting dual cultural identities and facing and accepting the trauma of

social integration with a more rational attitude. Ultimately, “we” will find a survival path suitable for Chinese Americans caught between two cultures. Cai’s story inspired Chinese Americans like me to explore the spatiality of culture in the mainstream culture, thereby alleviating cultural and spiritual dilemma and laying a solid foundation for subsequent trauma repair.

### 3.2. The Reconstruction of a Sense of Security

Establishing safety is an important stage in trauma recovery. In the context of social integration, my sense of insecurity mainly stemmed from being ostracized by the mainstream society and discrimination against Chinese.

However, “I saw that I too had been in the presence of great power” because of the chant of Mulan <sup>[7]</sup>. It inspired “me”, and “I” made up my mind that “I would have to grow up a warrior woman” <sup>[7]</sup>. When “I” was fully immersed in the story of Hua Mulan, “I” also became a real woman warrior in my imagination. “I” went into the mountain and was trained by two old people to become stronger. “After six years the deer let me run beside them”, even “I could jump twenty feet into the air from a standstill, leaping like a monkey over the hut” <sup>[7]</sup>. These skills made “me” physically strong. “I” am no longer the frail little girl who was afraid to speak, and I have the thick neck and firm skin that “I” once wanted. The external changes gave “me” a sense of initial security.

In addition to this, “I” also “learned to make my mind large, as the universe is large, so that there is room for paradoxes” <sup>[7]</sup>. When “I” returns home after studies, “I” realized that “we could be heroines, swordswomen” and that “even if she had to rage across all China, a swordswoman got even with anybody who hurt her family” <sup>[7]</sup>. So, “I” shouldered my own responsibility and led the soldiers to dethrone an emperor and killed the baron “in payment for crimes against the villagers” <sup>[7]</sup>. After that, “the villagers would make a legend about my perfect filiality” <sup>[7]</sup>. Under the guidance of Mulan, “I” have gained the recognition and respect of others and the society, and also gained a sense of security spiritually.

Through this progress, “I” increasingly realized that “the swordman and I are not so dissimilar”<sup>[7]</sup>. This awareness stems from the qualities “I” have acquired akin to Hua Mulan: being powerful, unbreakable and courageous in resistance. Specifically, this courage manifests not only in confronting prejudice - “It’s not just the stupid racists that I have to do something about”, but more importantly, in resisting systemic oppression as I vow to challenge “the tyrants who for whatever reason can deny my family food and work” <sup>[7]</sup>. Precisely because of this conviction, I have come to understand that “I” can use recording as the weapon and revenge to resist discrimination and protect myself, “not the beheading, not the gutting, but the words” <sup>[7]</sup>. “I” am no longer afraid of the trauma of social integration. Under the guidance of Mulan, “I” have found a way to resist discrimination, gradually affirmed myself, and eventually rebuilt “my” sense of security.

### 3.3. The Reconstruction of Intergenerational Connectedness

“Recovery can take place only within the context of relationships; it cannot occur in isolation” <sup>[9]</sup>. The mother is the first person that the child comes into contact with after birth, and she is an indispensable participant and witness during children’s growth process. Brave Orchid, the mother, is an important figure in guiding “I” to reconstruct the traumatic event. She is a traditional Chinese woman, but also an independent, well-educated woman. During her integration into American society, she also suffered from the trauma of social integration. Her experience and characteristic deeply influence and inspire “me”. Once in a long while, my mother would bring out the metal tube containing her medical diploma. It was this metal tube that gave “me” the first idea of my hometown, China. “When I open it, the smell of China flies out”, it is “a smell that comes from long ago, far back in the brain” <sup>[7]</sup>. Moreover, my mother told me the story of her struggle with a setting

ghost when she was young, and the experience of managing a laundry abroad. She set an example of perseverance and bravery for “me” and gained my trust and guide “me” to re-establish the intergenerational connection with her, which laid the foundation for reconstructing the traumatic memories. She also explained to me the reason for cutting my tongue: “I cut it so that you would not be tongue-tied”, and “your tongue would be able to move in any language” [7]. Mother wants to use this approach to enable “me” to have a better ability to use English, so that “I” can express myself in the mainstream society.

After that, “I” opened my heart to my mother and wanted my mother to know the real “me”. “I” made a list in my mind of more than 200 things that “I” wanted to tell my mother. In her own way, my mother “pries open my head and my fists and crams into them responsibility for time, responsibility for intervening oceans” [7]. It enabled “me” to understand the trauma of social integration that I had suffered, reconstruct the traumatic memories, and ultimately get rid of the disturbance of the traumatic event, thereby healing my inner self.

#### 4. Conclusion

As a second-generation immigrant of Chinese American descent, Kingston is also a witness to the trauma of social integration. She empathizes with the trauma of social integration experienced by the protagonist “I”. In *The Woman Warrior*, she ingeniously combines novels, autobiographies and myths, taking the lives and destinies of her own family and other Chinese people as the main theme. Through storytelling, she organically integrates many Chinese cultural traditions, folk traditions, customs and mythological legends into one. Under Kingston’s meticulous arrangement, the “I” in the novel, guided by the three mentors, found a path of self-reconciliation in the heterogeneous culture and eventually emerged from the trauma of social integration. In her works, “breaking silence, acknowledging female influence, and preserving cultural and national characteristics are a coordinated art” [10]. Kingston’s works are not only rooted in Chinese culture and deeply influenced by it, but she also continues to explore the ways of integrating Chinese and Western cultures in order to become a true “woman warrior” with a global perspective.

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