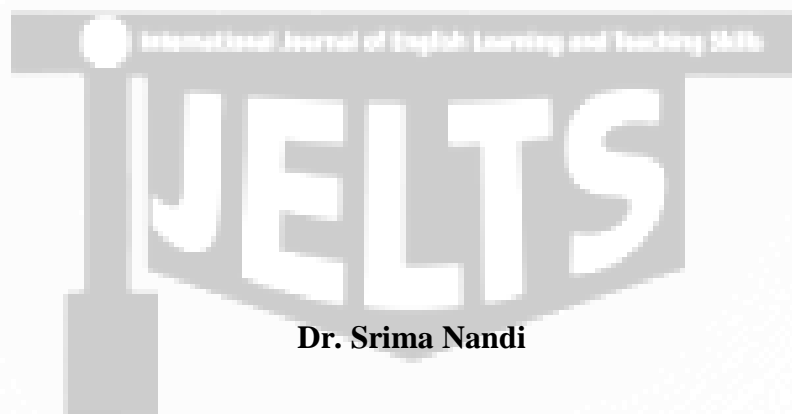


The Concept of “Foreigner-Within”: Exploring the Diasporic Dilemma in Maxine

Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts*



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“Identity is not a finished product, it is rather a social construction, hence always fabricated. The representation of identity therefore is an ongoing process, since immigrant identities are continually transformed by the journey...” (Thapan, p. 29)

Abstract

Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood among Ghosts* explores the theme of identity friction and the dilemma of hyphenated immigrants among Chinese Americans in the “nation of nations” (Behdad, p. 113). Kingston demonstrates the discourse of exclusion with the Chinese Americans who have settled in America due to the phenomenon known as the “Gold Rush” in America. This paper will lay emphasis on Kingston’s own aunt, Moon Orchid who travels to America after thirty years to meet her husband and claim her position as his wife. The poignant rejection by her husband, who has totally become an “American” by creating an American identity for himself, rejects his Chinese wife after getting an American wife.

The novel speaks of the disappointments of the Chinese American migration from China, the “Gold Mountain” of America. Kingston has worked hard and struggled to give meaning and voice to the marginalised community to the women like her mother and aunts. This paper will delve into the concept of “foreigner-within” (Lowe, p.5) among the Chinese American and the dilemma of identity in the foreign land. It will also explore the complex ways in which immigrants understand the notions of ‘identity’ and ‘home’ in the adopted land. The racial and cultural differences experienced by the Chinese Americans in “a forgetful nation” (Behdad, p. xiii) is a painful experience. Kingston narrates all these difficult times through a new narrative form that she has discovered and that is the “talk-stories.” Through the talk-stories she narrates stories of oppressions that ultimately becomes stories of defiance and through this device the dilemma of identity and the concept of “foreigner-within” will be articulated in this paper.

Key Words: Diaspora, Foreigner-Within, Talk-Story, Gold Mountain, Forgetful Nation

Introduction

Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts* explores the Chinese Americans disappointments of their migration from China to the “Gold Mountain” of America. This paper will explore the theme of identity friction and the diasporic dilemma among Chinese Americans in the “nation of immigrants” (Behdad, p. 113). The author-narrator reveals the stories of her family in *The Woman Warrior* through the new narrative form known as the “talk-stories.” She discovers this talk-story to narrate stories of oppressions that ultimately becomes the stories of defiance. I will explore these talk-stories using Lisa Lowe’s concept of “foreigner-within” (Lowe, p. 5) and bring into the forefront the cultural and racial differences experienced by the Chinese Americans in “A Forgetful Nation.”

A Forgetful Nation (2005), a book by Ali Behdad is a daring venture about issues of immigration and national identity regarding “disillusioning experiences and traumatic experiences” (Behdad, p. ix) in America. America is termed as a “forgetful nation” because of its treatment towards the immigrants in America. America proudly calls herself as the “nation of nations”, yet her treatment towards the immigrants and looking at them as “aliens” makes this paper an excellent piece of study with reference to Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior*. Behdad calls America as a forgetful nation because of its “historical amnesia towards immigration” which “is of paramount importance in the founding of the United States of America” (Behdad, p. xii). He uses the term “amnesia” in order to signify America’s “disavowal that entails a negative acknowledgement that is historically and collectively repressed” (Behdad, p.xii). He reiterates on the “complex dynamics of forgetting in nation-building” (Behdad, p. xiii) and I borrow some of his ideas in developing my paper with regard to the Chinese Americans that complicate the Chinese immigrants story in “immigrant America” (Behdad, p.xiv).

Behdad refers to immigrant America upon which the nation was founded and quotes J. Hector St. John de Crevecoeur’s “invocation of America as ‘every person’s country’” (Behdad, p. 3) in 1782, through the celebration of the country as a “nation of many nations” (Behdad, p. 3) in the poetry of Walt Whitman in the nineteenth century, to John F. Kennedy’s portrayal of the

United States as a “nation of immigrants”(Behdad, p. 3) in the twentieth century and the official archive of the nation is replete with examples of a founding myth that defines immigration as a form of national hospitality. Based on these points, I will analyse the trauma and dislocation of the Chinese Americans in Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior* (1989) in immigrant America and how the Americans’ treatment toward the Chinese will contradict the terms like “every person’s country”, “nation of many nations”, and “nation of immigrants.” This paper will project how Chinese in America have always been a “foreigner-within”—the concept used by Lisa Lowe in her book *Immigrant Acts* (1996) despite being “a nation of many nations.”

Kingston’s own aunt—Moon Orchid’s story is a real example of an immigrant’s life who seeks her husband after thirty years in America and who is ultimately denied as his wife, just because she is “un-American.” *The Woman Warrior* (1989) reverberates with the talk-stories and through these stories; Kingston narrates her family stories about her ancestors’ immigration to America. Kingston actually heard these talk-stories from her mother and her mother’s friends and how they came to America and what happened thereafter. Since it was in the form of talk-stories, the stories changed according to people’s situations, occasions and the audience listening to them.

Women in traditional China were married off within very short notices because the young Chinese men left for America in search of new jobs. They actually “went out on the road” (Kingston, p. 3). The “hurry-up weddings” (Kingston, p. 3) were celebrated and it was thought that the Chinese men “would responsibly come home” (Kingston, p. 3). So Kingston’s father, and her uncles and grandparents sailed for America, the Gold Mountain. The Chinese women thereafter lived an estranged life for several years. Kingston, through her talk-stories narrates these conventional stories of the Chinese in the new diasporic space and also their experiences as immigrants, as foreigners, as explorers, as labourers and as marginal beings. Their motive is to toil hard to build America into an economically stable country during their long stay in the United States. They considered America as their own country. They connect with America emotionally and loyally. We note Kingston’s sense of oneness and belonging to America and a long standing allegiance to a nation where she was born:

We’re not outsiders, we belong here, this is our country, this is our history, and we are part of America. We are part of American history. If it weren’t for us, America would be a different place...When I write, I also claim America in an artistic way. When people claim countries, it’s usually thought of as conquering them in war. I’m claiming America in a pacifist way, in an artistic way. (qtd. in Chi’en, 2004, p. 153)

Generations of her ancestors lived in America and strove hard for the making of America. They found relief as immigrants to America because they escaped the rigid Chinese traditional culture such as foot-binding and early marriage within their own community. To them, it was a journey from traditional China to a free America. The Chinese immigrants like her ancestors found relief in the Promised Land and looked upon the country with a sense of belonging and attachment. But the rigid Immigration Laws in America refused them from creating an allegiance and representation in the Adopted Land. Though they toiled hard for making America, it was their culture, their race and immigrant status that made them “outsiders.” They belong there as “foreigner-within” (Lowe, p. 5).

Lowe views that “Asia has always been a complex site on which the manifold anxieties of the U.S. nation-state have been figured: such anxieties have figured Asian countries as exotic, barbaric, and alien...” (Lowe, p. 4) “Asia is always seen as an immigrant, as the “foreigner-within,” even when born in the United States and the descendant of generations born here before” (Lowe, p.5-6). Though considering themselves as American citizens, the Asian Americans continue to be located outside the racial and cultural boundaries of the nation. With this as the focal point of reference, I will concentrate my argument on Kingston’s own aunt, Moon Orchid, who comes to America after thirty years to meet her husband. Her husband who was hurriedly married off in China seeks comfort in America and rejects Moon Orchid because she “lacked the hardness of this country” (Kingston, p. 153).

Moon Orchid lived alone in China while her husband in America gets an American wife. Being timid, meek and weak, she is unable to claim her position as his wife and claim the “American Wardrobe” (Kingston, p.130). The American wardrobe symbolises the American “sartorial codes of acculturation and Americanization” (Nandi, p. 202). It reflects on the intimate connection between the husband and wife. The American wardrobe also represents the

American household. Moon Orchid is satisfied with the money her husband sends and the maintenance he offers. She is unable to read the American situation because of the cultural ‘lag’ produced by immigration and lack of knowledge of the western culture, and also the English language that has kept her “out of place” in America. Her arrival to the New World and her unsuccessful venture to get her husband back makes her a “foreigner-within” before her Chinese husband who has now become an “American.” Kingston devotes a separate chapter in *The Woman Warrior* (1989) as “The Western Palace” (Kingston, p. 111) where her aunt’s marginalization and intense pain is explored. As Lowe (1996) has said that Asians are always looked upon as “aliens,” Moon Orchid becomes an alien in an alien space. When she meets her husband, he rebukes her saying: “I could get arrested if Americans knew about you. I’m living like an American” (Kingston, p. 153) Polygamy was practiced in China but in America it is against the laws to have two wives. He could not accept his Chinese wife because he has now started living like an American. An established doctor, he fails to recognise his Chinese wife and he warns her not to reveal their first marriage. According to him, his wife looked worn out with “white hair”, “wrinkled face”, and “fluttering hands”— she was indeed a ‘tiny lady’ and apt to be called a ‘grandmother’ (Kingston, p. 117). He has totally forgotten his wife and the “hurry-up weddings” were responsible for such amnesia.

Kingston’s mother, Brave Orchid, orders him to accept Moon Orchid, but he refuses to accept her and rudely addresses her “you can’t belong. You don’t have the hardness for this country. I have a new life” (Kingston, p. 113) He complains to Brave Orchid that Moon Orchid cannot fit into an American household (Kingston, p. 135). Therefore, Moon Orchid, in the words of Lisa Lowe (1996) is a “foreigner-within” in America and before her Chinese husband who considers himself as ‘American.’

The American-un-American friction between the Chinese wife and the Chinese turned American husband lays ground for the Diasporic dilemma. This un-Americanness has deprived her claiming her husband, who boldly says, “I don’t want her in my house” (Kingston, p.153). This statement, when looked upon metaphorically, implies America’s treatment to her immigrants in the country. So Moon Orchid in Lowe’s terms becomes a “nameless foreigner” and a “homeless refugee” (Lowe, p. 46). She loses her American home, American wardrobe

and her Americanised husband but gets entry into the American mental asylum after the great shock. Her “trauma of dislocation” (Behdad, p. 30) becomes complete.

Uprooted, exiled, displaced in the United States, Moon Orchid’s place in the “asylum for the oppressed” (Behdad, p. 8) —a home for the insane, becomes her actual ‘home.’ She is the ‘other’ and becomes traumatised in the “land of ghosts” (Kingston, p. 153). Chinese considered those people as ghosts who looked and behaved totally different from them. Both Moon Orchid and her husband consider each other as “ghosts” because both consider each other as “alien” and the “other.” Her Chinese culture and norms disavow her to be in the modern occidental society. He feels that his Chinese wife is a disrupter to his stable, American life and therefore, she must be punished. The ‘mad house’ or the Californian State Asylum becomes her future home. Her immigration, the American inability to acculturate to the western culture and climate are all intersectional. They marginalise her. She is a foreigner within and un-American. She *is* the ghost in the American soil. She lacks the “American politeness” (Kingston, p.118). She cannot welcome “American guests” (Kingston, p.118) to her husband’s “American household” (Kingston, p.153). She neither looks nor smells American and therefore, she is alienated and a “foreigner-within.” Her diasporic dilemma pushes her into the American Asylum that completes and ends her diasporic trauma and anxiety. This trauma and anxiety was because she could not negotiate between the conflicting politics of the new space.

Moon Orchid’s trauma and dislocation could not have taken place if she had remained in China, her home. She could not completely break away from her home and, this ‘home’ (America) away from ‘home’ (China) has caused the ‘alien other’ (Thapan, p. 28). As a voiceless person she becomes an invisible and insane person who seeks refuge in the State Asylum. Moon Orchid’s immigrant experience is coloured with a persistent desire to return home and the sense of mournful nostalgia for her homeland is accompanied with loss, nightmare and despair. She is unable to construct her diasporic identity in a society that is stratified by a system of social inequality and racial prejudice.

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