

The problem with legacies: analysis of chapter one, the warrior woman



Maxine Hong Kingston's memoirs do not share the focus of typical memoirs- biographical details of friends, siblings, favorite pastimes. Rather, Kingston examines the social influences that have shaped her life, view of herself, and the world. The author looks predominately at the " talk-story" of her mother, which are stories about Brave Orchid and life in China. Part of this Chinese legacy is the social and familial oppression of females that flows solidly throughout the stories in this novel. Perhaps the most striking instance of this oppression may be found in the startling scene that comprises the first chapter of *The Woman Warrior, No Name Woman*. Brave Orchid tells her daughter a precautionary tale about her " no-name" sister-in-law who committed suicide in China after conceiving an illegitimate child while her husband was in America. The story itself, by recounting the deeds of a woman her family refuses to remember, becomes taboo: " You must not tell anyone what I am about to tell you," warns the narrator's mother (1). By preserving only the sin of the story and thereby the condemnation of the " no-name-aunt," the mother efficiently neutralizes any of the specific characteristics which define a person, successfully doling the aunt's punishment and rendering her literally a nobody. The narrator muses, wondering, " what my aunt wore," imagining the possible scenarios that led to her aunt's pregnancy and death (6). Was it rape? Or mutual infatuation? Did it matter? " To be a woman, to have a daughter in starvation time was waste enough. My aunt could not have been the lone romantic who gave up everything for sex. Women in China did not choose" (6). The birth scene is one of the most disturbing and lovely scenes in the book. There is so much beauty present in the scene- ten little fingers and toes, the act of

breastfeeding for the first time, and an infant asleep upon her mother's
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stomach. The scene lies in stark contrast to the filth of a pigsty in the cold of night. It is ironic that a woman, the only being capable of carrying out the birthing process, should be ostracized because of that very act. It is tragic and it is beautiful that the newness of a life should so soon mix with the stillness of death- the well-water swallowing the two sparks of life that burn like the vagrant stars in the night sky that is the only witness to the aunt's solitude. How terrible and beautiful that, " Mothers who love their children take them along," even into the stillness of death that is far more kind than the politics of society. Subsequent to the men of the family leaving the village, Kingston notes, " They expected her alone to keep the traditional ways, which her brothers, now among the barbarians, could fumble without detection. The heavy, deep-rooted women were to maintain the past against the flood, safe for returning" (8). But in a world where women are " maggots" and " slaves" and encouraged to take part in their own subordination one could not expect otherwise. " There's no profit in raising girls. Better to raise geese than girls" (46). The only way to escape this legacy lies in the counterview to the traditional view of women as slaves or servile wives- the warrior woman embodied in the female avenger Fa Mu Lan. This figure represents a contrast to the traditional Chinese feudal system and provides the narrator with an alternative model to follow, as well as an empowering scope through which she may understand herself. Fifty years after her aunt's death, Kingston becomes her avenger and the voice to her memory.