

Words as weapons



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Stories and narratives are ubiquitous in both Chinese and American culture. These stories are often used as warnings or to teach a lesson to those who cannot or have not experienced something firsthand. The *Woman Warrior* by Maxine Hong Kingston is a patchwork of narratives that the main character and her family experience and tell. These “talk-stories” often tell one extreme or the other: of women who are polished and scholarly leaders, or of women who disguise their female identities and/or allow their lives to be dictated by their husbands. Maxine’s personal identity is often blurred by these constant stories and they continually affect how she interprets reality. Through these stories that Maxine’s mother tells her, her mother intends to teach her that as a woman, especially a Chinese woman, she must be quiet and submissive. However, after all these talk-stories, Maxine slowly finds her voice and begins to create her own talk-stories. She imagines multiple scenarios and endings for the many characters she encounters and, eventually, imagines different turnouts for her own life. In this novel, Maxine’s life is engulfed by stories and legends that are meant to limit her as a woman. However, these very stories are what empower her in the end to not only control her own fate, but also to realize she does not have to fit into just one mold.

Maxine’s mother tells her about her aunt, the “No Name Woman,” to illustrate how women are targeted and silenced in China and how Maxine must restrain herself to avoid the persecution her aunt faced. As a result of this, Maxine recognizes the difficulty she will face for things she has no control over. Her aunt was victimized for being pregnant in a difficult time, when it’s very possible that “some man had commanded her to lie with him

and be his secret evil.” (6). In ancient China, women had little voice in the paths of their lives, and if a man demanded that a woman do anything, she had no choice but to do what he said. Maxine imagines also how “ the other man was not, after all, much different from her husband. They both gave orders, she followed. ‘ If you tell your family, I’ll beat you. I’ll kill you. Be here next week.’ No one talked sex, ever” (6). Maxine is aware of her silence, especially when it comes to sex and sexual assault, and as a result, her lack of power and control in the situation. Her mother tells her this story as a warning, reminding her that if she is promiscuous or simply cannot hold her tongue, she will be punished severely. Her mother reminds her of this before she even begins telling the story, initially stressing, “ You must not tell anyone [...] what I am about to tell you” (4). Ironically, this story about a woman being silenced must also be kept quiet. Although there is no evidence of Maxine disobeying her mother’s orders to never speak about this story, she definitely does a lot of contemplating about her aunt’s possible reason to make such a seemingly huge mistake. Her imagination allows her to empathize with her aunt, realizing that her aunt likely had no command over the situation. This story is meant to scare Maxine into being obedient and quiet, however, Maxine realizes that the mother likely killed her child to protect it from the confines of society, but she still is not quite confident enough in her abilities to push the boundaries of those societal norms.

In “ White Tigers,” Maxine is taught that a woman can be so much more than a wife or a slave, and uses Fa Mu Lan as a role model in her American life. Although her mother tells her “ there’s no profit in raising girls. Better to raise girls than geese [...]’ When you raise girls, you’re raising children for

strangers,” Maxine begins to realize that she has worth also, and can be strong warrior like Fa Mu Lan (46). She uses the story to stand up to her racist boss, and even though she gets fired, she acknowledges that “there’s work to do, ground to cover. Surely, the eighty pole fighters, though unseen, would follow me and lead me and protect me, as is the wont of ancestors” (49). She gathers strength from the story of the heroic Fa Mu Lan to fight her battles instead of being stepped all over as she was taught to be in “No Name Woman.” Maxine realizes that although she does not have physical weapons to crush obstacles like her racist bosses, but she has her words. She notes, “The swordswoman and I are not so dissimilar. What we have in common are the words at our backs. The reporting is the vengeance-not the beheading, not the gutting, but the words” (53). Fa Mu Lan teaches her that she is also able to fight back and can use her words to fight like a swordswoman and take back what is hers. She empowers herself by creating a story for herself similar to Fa Mu Lan’s that includes her as a hero, not just a silent female.

Through the story of Moon Orchid in “At the Western Palace,” Maxine sees not only how a woman can be powerful and more than just a wife or slave, but also that Moon Orchid goes insane because of her inability to communicate. When Moon Orchid arrives at her husband’s workplace, he simply tells her: “It’s a mistake for you to be here. You can’t belong. You don’t have the hardness for this country[...]You can’t talk to [my guests]. You can barely talk to me” (152-153). Moon Orchid is told that she is not American enough to belong in the life her husband is living, similar to how Maxine is told she does not fit into either culture. Her husband tells her she

cannot live with them because of her lack of words. Moon Orchid eventually goes insane in her crowded new Los Angeles home, eventually ending up in a California insane asylum before passing away. This story demonstrates to Maxine that she may end up like her aunt if she continues to be silent. She also learns that she must vary her personal narratives when Brave Orchid says, “ The difference between mad people and sane people is that sane people have variety when they talk story. Mad people have only one story that they talk over and over” (159). To reach fulfillment, Maxine realizes that “ variety” is a must and she must avoid telling a single story about herself, specifically that she is and will continue to be a quiet submissive Chinese girl. Maxine learns that it is imperative that she find her voice and tell her many personal narratives to avoid being driven to insanity by her not only her mother’s, but also society’s norms.

“ A Song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe” is the story that fully empowers Maxine, as she relates to the poetess Ts’ai Yen and understands that she can also fit into the cultures of both America and China, rather than being a “ typical” quiet Chinese girl in America. Maxine struggled to combine the cultures of America and China her whole life, feeling too Chinese for American school but simultaneously too American for Chinese school. She grapples with silence and her journey to find her voice. Finally, she stands up to her mother’s abuse, shouting: “ They tell me I’m smart[...]Even if I am stupid and talk funny and get sick, I won’t let you turn me into a slave or a wife. I’m getting out of here” (201). Maxine defies the constraints her mother has used to control and suppress her and attains a sense of self-empowerment. She realizes through the stories that she can be a successful student and

person, despite her gender and even if she is “stupid and talks funny.” After her outburst, she notices that “the retarded man, the huncher, he disappeared. I never saw him again or heard what became of him” (205). It is possible that the man was another ghost of the story that haunted her, symbolizing her silence, and he served as a physical burden to her until she was able to liberate herself. Ts’ai Yen similarly had difficulty communicating with the barbarians, as whenever she attempted to talk, “they imitated her with senseless singsong words and laughed” (208). Maxine relates to this, as she sees herself as someone trying to communicate with the barbarians of America that simply mock or ignore her. However, Ts’ai Yen finally finds a song that matches the flutes of the barbarians, and although she sang in Chinese, “the barbarians understood their sadness and anger. Sometimes they thought they could catch barbarian phrases about forever wandering” (209). Like Maxine’s story, the talk-story of Ts’ai Yen begins with a woman struggling to connect with others outside of her culture, but eventually managing to sing a beautiful song that the others may not be able to understand, but can definitely appreciate. Maxine notes that her mother told her this story, and “the beginning is hers, the ending, mine” (206). This marks the full empowerment of Maxine, as she manages to weave a story meant to limit her into a story of courage and power about her own life, which she now controls and successfully meshes her separate cultures.

Talk-stories allow Maxine to realize that her own life is a story that can and must be told; she has the power to choose the ending of her life story by fitting herself into different molds similar to the ones she imagines for the characters of the stories her mother tells her. With each story she is told, she

begins to empathize more and more with the main characters and can relate to them in one way or another. Through stories like “ No Name Woman,” she learns that the world will be working against her no matter what. However, she is taught through stories like “ Fa Mu Lan” and “ A Song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe” that despite her femininity, she can be powerful. She realizes that oftentimes words can pose as a weapon, especially for a Chinese woman who is told she must be silent or face retaliation. Although she initially struggles to make sense of the permissive American customs, she eventually discovers a way to neatly blend both cultures. Maxine finds her voice and stands up for herself, against her mother and against the standards society holds her to, and realizes she can become like Fa Mu Lan and Ts'ai Yen.