Contradictory criticism of the woman warrior: kingston’s text as a political devi...

Published in 1975, The Woman Warrior turned autobiographer Maxine Hong Kingston into one of the most prominent female voices of her generation. As gender/feminist studies programs developed at major Universities across the United States, professors added Kingston’s story to their curricula as an example of finding one’s feminist voice through female authorship. Yet, while feminists discovered an empowering message within the text, critics argued that the book was not only culturally inaccurate in its portrayal of Chinese culture but also irresponsible, in that it reinforced the stereotypical American views of China as an entirely patriarchal and oppressive society. In articles written about The Woman Warrior on both sides of the debate, critics such as Yuan Shu largely focus on feminist theory and concepts that were taught in the 1960’s and 1970’s. Yet, while it seems appropriate for critics to base their research on the feminist theory that was being studied at the time that the autobiography was written, Kingston’s ideas within the text were in many ways ahead of her time.

Contemporary feminist critics have included recent feminist theory into their analyses of the text to reveal priorities other than focusing on the differences between Kingston and her mother, or the No-Name woman and the woman warrior; more important is the conformative and transformative nature of each respective character. However, contemporary critics (and arguably anti-feminist critics) of the autobiography continue to base their arguments on the initial feminist response to the work that took place during what is commonly referred to as the second wave of the feminist movement (in the 1960’s and 1970’s) rather than acknowledging more contemporary feminist research. In this analysis of both the novel and the critical essays that

followed, I will illustrate the distinctions between the second and third wave approaches to the work, and I will also illustrate how anti-feminist critics have chosen specific pieces of the novel and its critical analysis to base their arguments rather than focusing on the novel or criticism as a whole.

In the 1960's and 1970's, second wave feminists focused their efforts on attaining equality for women worldwide. When The Woman Warrior was published, feminists used the work as an example of the narrative of a woman who was directly affected by the patriarchal restraints of her culture (Brave Orchid) and a child (Kingston) who although born in the United States, rather than in China, struggles to find her own feminist voice. While second wave feminists were not entirely incorrect in focusing largely on gender in their analysis of the novel, third wave feminists such as Bell Hooks believe that the multi-cultural aspect of the novel is equally important and should be treated as such. In her article Feminism A Transformational Politic, Hooks states that the problem with suggesting, as the second wave feminist movement did, " that racism and class exploitation are merely the offspring of the parent system; patriarchy" is that " this has led to the assumption that resisting patriarchal domination is a more legitimate feminist action than resisting racism and other forms of domination"(465). Particularly because the majority of the second wave feminist movement in the United States was comprised of privileged white women, women from other cultural backgrounds were hesitant to join a movement in which they felt they would be forced to lose their cultural identities in order to fight for gender equality.

Although there are many differences between third wave and second wave feminism, the incorporation of multiculturalism by third wave feminists is

considered to be one of the major transitions between the two waves. Specifically, in the case of The Woman Warrior, most feminist critics who have written about the autobiography in the last twenty years, such as Shirley Goek-lin Lim, have incorporated a more multi-cultural approach in their analysis while simultaneously taking into consideration that the autobiography was published during the height of the second wave. For example, in Lim's article The Tradition of Chinese American Women's Life Stories, she acknowledges the divide between second and third wave feminist theory and expands on Bell Hooks' insistence on the importance of taking a multicultural approach to feminism when she states that Kingston " has not an autobiographical story to tell but a racial and gendered consciousness to imitate and create"(264). Yet, while Lim clearly demonstrates an understanding of third wave feminist theory in her article, Yuan Shu, an antifeminist critic, either misunderstands or entirely ignores this type of response when she states, " Critics such as Yuan Shu also contend that Kingston's mother, Brave Orchid, and herself are character foils of one another and that her mother represents patriarchal tradition as opposed to Kingston's individualism." Yet, while feminist critics such as Ruth Jenkins " explore the double bind of articulating female voice in cultures that ordain silence as the appropriate expression of female experience"(1), the critics do not, as Shu believes, blame Chinese culture alone for the patriarchal tradition that promotes female silence. Instead, Jenkins points to the event in the autobiography when a young Kingston realizes that " girls had to whisper to make [them]selves American-feminine"(Kingston 200) to reveal that American culture is just as responsible for female oppression as any other.

Kingston has herself stated that she is a feminist and that her work largely represents herself and her struggle with the gender restrictions in society. Yet, in much of the analysis of the novel, there is a misrepresentation of feminism that leads critics to pit the No-Name woman against the woman warrior by viewing them as representations of " the victim" and " the feminist" rather than by looking at the faults and contractions of each to determine what Kingston is attempting to say about the relative nature of truth. Although critics of feminism have capitalized on the opposing traits of the No-Name woman and the woman warrior, some of the blame for the misrepresentation of these characters does lie in the feminist response to the text. When Ruth Jenkins states in her article, Authorizing Female Voice and Experience, that through her aunt's pregnancy and suicide " Kingston takes revenge on the culture that denies female voice"(2) she does " other" Chinese culture by implying that patriarchy and oppression are unique to Chinese traditional values. While there is evidence within the text to support Jenkins's statement, Kingston is also critical of American culture and its tradition of female silence in her autobiography. She states that as a child she was quiet because she " invented an American-feminine speaking personality"(Kingston 172). Yet critics, rather than solely looking at the text to support their claims that Kingston " others" the Chinese culture that she never personally experienced, focus their arguments on the feminist analysis of the autobiography that was based on theory written at the time that it was published.

One of Kingston's most prominent critics is Frank Chin, who has consistently argued against the authenticity of the work, stating that its non-traditional

approach to the autobiography “ is simply a device for destroying history and literature’”(Nishime 2). Chin adamantly denies that the autobiography is an accurate portrayal of Chinese society and goes so far as to say that the work is destructive to Chinese-Americans in that it enforces the patriarchal and oppressive stereotypes that he and other scholars have attempted to deconstruct. Whether Chin is reacting to his own personal interpretation of the novel or to the largely feminist response that arose following the publication of Kingston’s work is unclear. Although many of the tragic events of the novel (such as the suicide of the no-name woman) take place in China, Kingston does not specifically blame these tragedies on Chinese culture but rather focuses on the faults of patriarchy itself. However, in an analysis of the cultural politics in “ The Woman Warrior”, critic Yuan Shu suggests that due to the rise of the second wave of feminism in the 1970’s, much of the literary criticism surrounding the work has been centered on the idea that the autobiography is “ an exposure of misogyny in Chinese culture and an effort to articulate a distinctive feminist consciousness”(Shu 5).

Although Frank Chin states that it is the inauthenticity of the autobiography that he opposes, his statement that Kingston’s work is “ destructive” implies that his reaction to the novel is more based on certain feminist interpretations of Chinese culture as innately restrictive rather than on Kingston’s novel itself. Yuan Shu, two decades after Chin’s criticisms, focuses her analysis entirely on the feminist response that followed the publication of Kingston’s autobiography. She blames the feminist criticism, rather than the novel itself, for the demonization of Chinese culture. In particular, she targets Chinese men, stating that Kingston “ never critiques patriarchal

values or institutional racism” in her work but rather that feminist critics have construed “ the story in terms of the American cultural imagination of China”(Shu 2). Shu goes on to state that there is a “ gap between Kingston’s work and feminist interpretations of the work”(Shu 5), affirming that Kingston’s ideas on race and gender may in fact be radical yet subtle reflections on a particular historical context.