Chapter 3

The Woman Warrior

Maxine Hong Kingston's The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts reads as a study of an individual's struggle with the demands of two cultures. On the one hand, the American culture in which the narrator lives advocates an uncompromising submission to its bewitching ideals of individualism and freedom (Rothfork). On the other, the Chinese culture, requires an inflexible adherence to roles and responsibilities prescribed by traditional Confucian social practices, or what have been described as "repressive relics" (Rothfork). Thus, the novel can be viewed according to Suzanne Juhasz's definition which places it as "embod[-ying] the search for identity in the narrative act."(173). However, it is more than a "search for identity" since the book itself depicts the narrator's effort to transcend the opposing forces of both cultures in order to forge a cultural symbiosis or what can be seen in Confucian terms as the "middle path", a harmonious balance between two seemingly conflicting social forces. The search for identity of the female self or individual in the novel

naturally calls for redefinitions of Confucian cultural practices and social rules. My objective in this chapter is to critically analyze how the protagonist of this novel negotiates, deconstructs and ultimately achieves acceptance through an imaginative reconstruction of the essential practices of Confucianism.

The principles of Confucianism, in "No Name Woman", the first section of the novel, pertain to the moral standards of behaviour as regulated within the philosophical tenets of Li and Yi. This can clearly be perceived in the ritualized behavioural mores which characterize the power relations contained within the hierarchical order of the Five Cardinal Relationships. The ruler-minister, father-son, husband-wife, elder brother-younger brother, and friend-friend relationships are defined by the qualities of unquestioning loyalty, filial piety and obedience. But such values are not reciprocal for they are only expected of those of lower status by those who are generally senior in age, experience and presumably, wisdom. The obvious consequence of the above concerns the attendant principles of correct behaviour and conduct required of women since the body of Confucian works has defined women as weaker entities who should be subjected to the authority of men (see previous chapter). Mark Elvin calls these principles of behaviour:

> "Confucian" virtues. These were in essence virtues that stabilized a society that was ordered according to a hierarchy of age, and

divided into kin-groups based on male dominance and male descent-lines.

(Female Virtue And The State In China 111)

Consequently, maintaining and continuing the patrilineal lines become important, resulting in the strict control of sexual behaviour for women as "laws on sexual conduct helped create and reinforce patriarchal structures." (Ebrey, The Inner Quarters 259). This is again substantiated by Chow Kai-wing's study of the involvement of scholars in their lineages:

> It was in the interest of scholars involved in lineage activities that their **female relatives maintain a good reputation by strictly observing all rules of proper behaviour. Misbehaviour that violated norms of women's purity disgraced the entire descent group** (personal emphasis) of which the scholars were members....**Women were at a disadvantage in the patriarchal lineage not just because of their inferior status but also because of stereotypes of female behaviour. Women were considered the major source of domestic conflicts. Most lineage regulations enumerated and warned against certain types of misbehaviour by women** (personal emphasis) especially in the their relations with their husband's family members.
>
> (The Rise of Confucian Ritualism 211)

It becomes obvious that women are bound and contained within the boundaries of social rules exemplified by the so-called three obediences whereby a young girl owes obedience to her father, a wife to her husband and a widowed mother to her eldest son. It encourages female submission to the authority of the males. The idea of the strict control of behaviour and sexual conduct becomes significant in the dual interpretations of the aunt's tragedy in this section of the book. The first refers to how the aunt's suicide is construed as an incident of shame by the protagonist's mother and father's family. Her aunt has violated "norms of women's purity" (Chow 211) by having a baby outside the social sanction of a marriage approved by family, clan as well as lineal authority. As a result, the existence of the aunt is deliberately erased from familial memories. She is only resurrected as a two dimensional figure whose death is used as a means to ensure adherence to social practices by the women. The persona of the aunt, however, takes on tragic nuances through the protagonist's imaginative reconstruction of her character and life history. Therefore, the character of the aunt becomes a tool for social control within the patriarchal structures of Chinese society.

As such, Kingston's autobiographical novel begins with the story of her forgotten aunt in "No Name Woman". It is the mother, however, who initiates the 'narrative act' by a negative admonition:

> 'You must not tell anyone,' my mother said, 'what I am about to tell you. In China your father had a sister who killed herself. She jumped into the family well. We say that your father has all brothers because it is as if she had never been born. (11)

Dramatically succinct, the skeletal introduction simultaneously manages to deliver a warning to the protagonist and deny the aunt a position; a status within the hierarchical structure of the family. Robbed of her identity by Confucian social norms, she is aptly called the "no name woman". As a nameless entity that merely exists within the rigid boundaries of patriarchal control, she becomes a didactic instrument to be used in order to elicit obedience against sexual transgression. The denial of her existence is important for it is an expression of social control, seen as a form of punishment for her sexual iniquity. The mother then acts as a powerful conduit for the transmission of Confucian social mores. Her repeated negative admonition becomes a refrain of sorts, a chant to lull the protagonist into submission:

> 'Don't let your father know that I told you. He denies her. Now that you have started to menstruate, what happened to her could happen to you. Don't humiliate us. You wouldn't like to be forgotten as if you had never been born The villagers are watchful.' (13)

Thus, Patricia Ebrey's study of the roles and responsibilities of women within the 'inner' domestic realm of the home during the Sung dynasty is still relevant for today as mothers are still attributed with the training and basic education of girls:

> Mothers were also credited with training their daughters to be sweet, agreeable, deferential, and reserved....Some of the traits cultivated in daughters, such as physical modesty, seem to have been important above all as markers of [Confucianistic] respectability...
>
> (Ebrey, The Inner Quarters 186)

What is more important at this point is the protagonist's reactions created in part by the mother's dramatic account of the events leading to the death of the aunt. It is, however, a narration which seems to hide rather than reveal the truth behind the aunt's tragedy:

> Whenever she had to warn us about life, my mother told stories that ran like this one, a story to grow up on. She tested our strength to establish realities. Those in the emigrant generations who could not reassert brute survival died young and far from home. **Those of us in the first American generations have had to figure out how the invisible world the emigrants built around our childhoods fits in solid America**...(personal emphasis)

> Chinese-Americans, when you try to understand what things in you are chinese, how do you separate what is peculiar to childhood, to poverty, insanities, one family, your mother who marked your growing with stories, from what is Chinese? What is Chinese tradition and what is the movies?
>
> If I want to learn what clothes my aunt wore, whether flashy or ordinary, I would have to begin, 'Remember Father's drowned-in-the-well sister?' I cannot ask that. My mother has told me once and for all the useful parts. She will add nothing unless powered by Necessity, a riverbank that guides her life (13)

Marked by an anxious and apprehensive confusion, the narrative voice is caught in the dilemma of separating and choosing between what has been 'marked' by her mother as traditional Chinese mores of behaviour and values conferred by 'solid' America. It is this questioning that begins the protagonist's imaginative reinvention of the persona of the aunt. Writing as a choice to remember her aunt is important for she does not choose to remember her aunt by submitting to the ritual practice of burning 'origamied' paper house and clothes as sacrificial offerings:

> My aunt haunts me - her ghost drawn to me because now, after fifty years of neglect, I alone devote pages of paper to her, though not origamied into houses and clothes. I do not think she always

> means me well. I am telling on her, and she was a spite suicide, drowning herself in the drinking water (22)

Words become the metaphorical 'origamy', a linguistic tool whereby through the rewriting of the story of her aunt, the narrator begins her own exploratory journey to find her own identity.

The literary reconfiguration of the aunt's history embarks with the narrative voice assuming reasons for the aunt's pregnancy. She states, "My aunt could not have been the lone romantic who gave up everything for sex. Women in the old China did not choose." (14). The aunt emerges as the archetypical Chinese woman, fearful and naïve, blindly obeying the commands of men. Caught in social net of male dominance, she submits to the male stranger - "His demand must have surprised, then terrified her. She obeyed him; she always did as she was told" (14). She becomes a helpless victim of rape and social law, for when"[S]he told the man, 'I think I'm pregnant' [H]e organized the raid against her." (14). Perhaps, her aunt is the:

> unusually beloved, the precious only daughter, spoiled and mirror gazing because of the affection the family lavished on her. When her husband left, they welcomed the chance to take her back from the in-laws; she could live like the little daughter for just a while longer (17)

As either the fearfully obedient woman or the spoiled daughter, the aunt is being given an identity. What is more empowering in this reconstruction of the aunt's persona is the physical and sensuous joy the aunt derives from, the daily routine of combing her hair. Even in this small act, the aunt acts against the norm for:

> At the mirror.. [she] combed individuality into her bob. A bun could have been contrived to escape into black streamers blowing in the wind or in quiet wisps about her face, but only the older women ..wear buns...(16)

The key issue however, lies in the aunt's pregnancy which seems to threaten the social and lineal fabric of the village. The man;

> [h]e may have been somebody in her own household, but intercourse with a man outside the family would have been no less abhorrent. All the village were kinsmen, and the titles shouted in loud country voices never let kinship be forgotten..(18)

The villagers, viewing her and her unborn baby as a threat to the delicate balance of kinship, organize a raid to her family home:

> In the village structure, spirits shimmered among the live creatures, balanced and held in equilibrium by time and land. But one human being flaring up into violence could open up a black hole, a maelstorm that pulled in the sky. The frightened villagers, who depended on one another to maintain the real, went to my aunt to show her a personal, physical representation of the break she had made in the 'roundness'. Misallying couples snapped off the future, which was to be embodied in true offspring. The villagers punished her for acting as if she could have a private life, secret and apart from them.(19)

The raid is successful but the aunt defies conventions by giving birth and then taking her own life and that of the baby instead of passively waiting for punishment. An undeniably composite picture of the aunt as a frustrated, sensual, tragic but dignified figure caught in a social fabric which suffocates the individual is drawn. The complex process of reinventing and resurrecting the aunt's voice has bestowed her with a character, a persona. What is more important however, is the fact that her successful formation undermines the skeletal and two dimensional depiction of her through the maternal narration. She is thus punished by being forgotten for - "[t]he real punishment was not the raid swiftly inflicted by the villagers, but the family's deliberately forgetting her." (22). The figure of the aunt then becomes the manipulative apparatus for commanding obedience to social mores. Patriarchal norms funneled through the maternal narration have

stripped bare the aunt's persona, confining her within the boundaries of masculine 'necessity' to continue patriarchal lines. Nevertheless, it is through the imaginative restitution that the aunt becomes the "spite suicide", a vengeful force whose story and persona have been resurrected through the imagination of the author.

The deliberate act of remembering her aunt in written words proves an important starting point for the author-narrator to begin the search for her identity. In the second section of the book entitled "White Tigers", the search begins with the intriguing use of the Hua Mulan legend as an imaginative means of coping with the various social forces that seems to overwhelm the narrator. Interestingly the narrator states, "[M]y American life has been such a disappointment." (47). This disillusionment seems to spring from the feeling of uselessness, chagrin and frustration that has not allowed her the chance to rise up against the diverse social forces that appear to jeopardize the existence of the author and her family. Disturbing news from China undergoing the Cultural Revolution set off fearful vibrations in the lives of the narrator's parents:

> The news from China has been confusing...I was nine years old when the letters made my parents, who are rocks, cry. My father screamed in his sleep. My mother wept and crumpled up the letters....The only letters they opened without fear were the ones with red borders...The other letters said that my uncles were made

> to kneel on broken glass during their trials and ..They were all executed, and the aunt whose thumbs were twisted off drowned herself... (51)

China, and the relatives who live there, who once proved to be the unshakable source of tradition and continuity for the parents, are now torn asunder by a social revolution that has overturned the seemingly eternal Confucian social structure. This feeling of instability is further amplified by loss of their launderette and their community to "urban renewal", a distinct feature of American material development. The narrator, who grew up in such surroundings, is imbued with feelings of hopelessness in the face of what seems to be unsurmountable obstacles raised by both the American as well as Chinese cultures. The American culture is racist and exploitative:

> I once worked at an art supply house...'Order more of that nigger yellow, will ya?' the boss told me. 'Bright, isn't it? Nigger yellow.' 'I don't like the word,' I had to say in my bad, small-person's voice that makes no impact...I also worked at a land developers' association...planning a banquet for contractors.... 'Did you know the restaurant you chose for the banquet is being picketted by CORE and the NAACP?' I squeaked. 'I refuse to type these invitations,'... 'You will be paid up to here,' he said. 'We'll mail you the cheque.'(50)

A clash of cultural values evidently occurs especially when the writer seems to be most affected by the traditional Confucian attitudes towards women which are represented by the constant litanies of popular sayings like:

> Feeding girls is feeding cowbirds.....There's no profit in raising girls. Better to raise geese than girls...When you raise girls, you're raising children for strangers. (48)

Such negative injunctions are meant to emphasize the superior position of men. As social markers that indicate the boundaries of roles and responsibilities for both men and women, it is clearly seen that Confucian precepts are disseminated to the populace by being :

> ...reduced to one-line quotations, proverbs and folk sayings for oral repetitions among both literate and illiterate such as: 'The woman has her correct place within and the man has his correct place without' or 'To be a woman means to submit.' Many phrases beginning with the negative injunctions that 'a woman does not...' were invariably and relentlessly inscribed upon the young female consciousness...(Croll 14)

Clearly the narrator reacts strongly against such exhortations - "I'm not a bad girl,' I would scream. 'I'm not a bad girl. I'm not a bad girl.' I might as well have

said, 'I'm not a girl.'" (48). Sandwiched between two cultures that would seem to deny her individuality an existence, the author-narrator reaches into her imagination as well as her Chinese cultural heritage for strength. Thus, Kingston's literary appropriation of the legend of Hua Mulan works as a means of psychologically searching for strength to transcend her helplessness in overcoming the American as well as Chinese cultural mores:

> To avenge my family, I'd have to storm across China to take back our farm from the Communists; I'd have to rage across the United States to take back the laundry in New York and the one in California. Nobody in history has conquered and united both North America and Asia. There's work to do, ground to cover....(50)

In a sense, the narrator has moved out of the 'inner realm' of properly weak, passive and submissive qualities for women into the 'outer realm' of masculine values of physical strength and aggressiveness employed to do altruistic deeds; by adopting the guise of a male warrior. Thus, by saving the imaginative villagers and defeating the 'fat baron, the writer has metaphorically slayed the forces that threatened to overwhelm her family in America. What is more important and interesting however is how the author deliberately infuses elements from the myth of Yue Fei, a legendary general who lived during the Sung dynasty. His fame lies not only in his military exploits but also in the words inscribed by his mother on his back as a constant reminder to be loyal to both country and

emperor. In this case, the narrator has it inscribed on her metaphorical self, who has been trained to endure and fight. This fusion of the elements from two legendary figures is an act of empowerment through words or the literary imagination. Kingston herself substantiates this point when she discusses her use of Chinese myths and legends in her writing:

> The myths and the lives in *The Woman Warrior* are intergrated in the women's and girls' stories so that we cannot find the seams where a myth leaves off and a life and imagination begin. Fa Mu Lan is a fantasy that inspires the girls' psyches and their politics. The myths transform lives and are themselves changed....Sinologists have criticized me for not knowing myths and for distorting them; pirates correct my myths, revising them to make them conform to some traditional Chinese version. **They don't understand that myths have to change, be useful or be forgotten. Like the people who carry them across oceans, the myths have become American...I take the power I need from whatever myth. Thus Fa Mu Lan has the words cut into her back; in the traditional story, it is the man, Ngak Fei (Yue Fei) the Patriot, whose parents cut vows on his back. I mean to take his power for women.** (personal emphasis). (Approaches To Teaching Kingston's The Woman Warrior 24)

By appropriating the myths of Hua Mulan and Yue Fei, the narrator has redefined the values accorded to women. From being helpless and deemed as useless; she has become the individual who has within her both the feminine and masculine qualities. The narrator has become the "Female Avenger":

> The swordwoman and I are not so dissimilar. May my people understand the resemblance soon so that I can return to them. What we have in common are the words at our backs. The idioms for *revenge* are 'report a crime' and 'report to five families'. The reporting is the vengence-not the beheading, not the gutting, but the words. And I have so many words - 'chink' words and 'gook' words too - that they do not fit on my skin. (53).

And the swordwoman and the narrator are indeed "not so dissimilar". This imaginative reinvention has allowed the write-narrator to break the shackles of traditional precepts for Chinese woman and to be able to rise above them by reaching into her cultural heritage as an enriching as well as empowering source.

The creation of the aunt's story together with the retelling of the legends of Hua Mulan and Yue Fei act as a continuing process of literary metamorphosis for the author-narrator. This development permits the writer to explore through the life histories of the various women in her family, the customary aspects of being woman. As such, the exploratory search becomes a medium, a trial of sorts

for the author in her difficult forging of her own identity. This process is continued in the next two chapters entitled "Shaman" and "At The Western Palace". These two stories are essentially the histories of her mother, Brave Orchid and her mother's sister, Moon Orchid. Structurally placed side by side their accounts can be read together like two sides of a coin, sensitively portraying the dilemma of adapting to a foreign culture. The cultural dilemma springs from the sense of rootlessness that arises when the Chinese culture that has formed the personas of both women is transposed to a land full of "ghosts" or rather, things foreign and American.

The chronicle of Brave Orchid begins with the author's need to understand her own mother; to see the forces that have helped shape her mother and made her what she is presently - someone who has toiled endlessly for the survival of the family but who did not want to integrate fully into American life because of the ties that bound her to China:

> 'I work so hard,' she said...Oh, but it's the potatoes that will ruin my hands" (96)
>
> "This is terrible ghost country, where a human being works her life away," she said. "Even the ghosts work, no time for acrobatics. I have not stopped working since the day the ship landed. I was on my feet the moment the babies were out. In China I never even had to hang up my own clothes. I shouldn't have left, but your father

> couldn't have supported you without me. I'm the one with the big muscles." (97)

Thus, survival becomes the ruling force in her life, allowing her to cope with the difficulties that beset the family in a foreign land. Her name itself, "Brave Orchid" reveals the hidden fountain of resilient strength that proves to be an important and essential contrast to Moon Orchid in the way they cope. A picture, a graduation photograph of Brave Orchid begins the author's narration:

> I picked out my mother immediately. Her face is exactly her own, though forty years younger. She is so familiar....My mother is not soft; the girl with the small nose and dimpled underlip is soft. My mother is not humourous...My mother does not have smiling eyes;...Most of the graduates are girls whose faces have not yet formed; my mother's face will not change anymore, except to age. She is intelligent, alert, pretty. I can't tell if she's happy. (58)

It is a face that bespeaks strength, determination and stoic intelligence. These qualities are masculine in nature, not feminine or frivolous in beauty. Moreover, it would be this fortitude that let her subtly rebel against the Confucian conventions that demand a passive waiting for her husband to summon her to America. Instead, she chooses to study midwifery, and by doing so achieves a form of freedom:

> Free from families, my mother would live for two years without servitude. She would not have to run errands for my father's tyrant mother with the bound feet or thread needles for the old ladies, but neither would there be slaves and nieces to wait on her. Now she would get hot water only if she bribed the concierge. When I went away to school my mother said, 'Give the concierge oranges. (61)

Independence comes with a price that requires initiative and it is this initiative to courageously volunteer to sleep in the haunted room of the dormitory that earns her respect from her other classmates. Respected as an excellent student and midwife cum doctor her fearlessness against ghosts reveals her ability to cope:

> My mother may have been afraid, but she would be a dragoness ('my totem, your totem'). She could make herself not weak. During danger she fanned out her dragon claws and rifled her red sequin scales and unfolded her coiling green stripes.(65)

But it is also this mother who teaches her children to be fearful of "ghosts" in America - "But America has been full of machines and ghosts - Taxi Ghosts, Bus Ghosts, Police Ghosts, Fire Ghosts.." (90). Brave Orchid can not integrate nor assimilate, and is unable to draw strength from both the Chinese as well as the American cultures. Brave Orchid becomes a paradox for her daughter who

realizes that her mother is both a source of immense strength as well as suffocating cultural mores. In a reply to her mother's wish to gather everyone, to live under one roof, she says:

> "When I'm away from here," I had to tell her, "I don't get sick. I don't go to the hospital every holiday. I don't get pneumonia, no dark spots on my x-rays. My chest doesn't hurt when I breathe...I've found some places in this country that are ghost-free. And I think I belong there, where I don't catch colds or use my hospitalization insurance. Here I'm sick so often, I can barely work. I can't help it , Mama."
>
> She yawned. "It's better, then, for you to stay away...You can come for visits." She got up and turned off the light. "Of course, you must go, Little Dog."
>
> A weight lifted from me. The quilts must be filling with air. The world is somehow lighter. She has not called me that endearment for years - a name to fool the gods. I am really a Dragon, as she is a Dragon, both of us born in dragon years. I am practically a first daughter of a first daughter....She sends me on my way, working always and now old, dreaming the dreams about shrinking babies and the sky covered with airplanes and a Chinatown bigger than the ones here. (100-101)

The need to break away in order to find herself thus becomes an important task of finding her individual identity for the author-narrator. And this is done through the retelling of her mother's life before she came to China. The narrator is thus able to understand that the work-worn mother she knows is a consequence of coping with the overwhelming need to survive in a foreign country. Her mother's past reveals her mother as a person of personal strength and initiative. Thus, the telling allows the narrator to come into terms with the changes and adaptation that the mother has undergone. And she becomes aware of the social norms that she has inherited and those that she now faces in America.

Moon Orchid, however, proves to be a study in contrast to Brave Orchid. "At The Western Palace" details the events from her coming to America to her eventual madness at her failure to claim her husband. As the epitome of the Confucian ideal woman and wife, she passively waits as a mark of obedience for her husband to send for her from America but he never does:

> Moon Orchid did not say anything. For thirty years she had been receiving money from him from America. But she had never told him that she wanted to come to the United States. She waited for him to suggest it, but he never did. Nor did she tell him that her sister had been working for years to transport her here. First Brave Orchid had found a Chinese-American husband for her daughter.

> Then the daughter had come and had been able to sign the papers to bring Moon Orchid over. (114)

Fearful and not able to derive courage from her inner self, she seeks to delay her meeting with her husband. Interestingly, both Brave Orchid and Moon Orchid talk about confronting Moon Orchid's husband the Chinese or Confucian way. Social rites and etiquette only recognizes the primary wife, as the lawful spouse and all other women are considered concubines without any rights or positions. This cultural act of claiming her rights in a land that only recognize the reason and logic of constitutional laws seems doomed to failure, for without the support of clan and kin, Moon Orchid's position will not be recognized. Both Moon Orchid and Brave Orchid, in her insistence that her sister confront her husband, can be seen as traditional anomalies existing as marginalized beings in a world of hard materialism. They can be likened ironically to "ghosts". Nevertheless, the ghost metaphor is accurately used again to describe Moon Orchid's husband who has become a "ghost", for, by completely assimilating into American society, he has totally annihilated every nuance of his ethnic and cultural identity and heritage:

> "Why are you here?" he asked..."You weren't supposed to come here," he said,... "It's a mistake for you to be here. You can't belong. You don't have the hardness for this country. I have a new life."
>
> "What about me?" whispered Moon Orchid...

> "I have a new wife," said the man.
>
> "She's only your second wife," said Brave Orchid. "This is your real wife."... He looked at Moon Orchid. Again the rude American eyes. "You go live with your daughter. I'll mail you the money I've always sent you. I could get arrested if the Americans knew about you. I'm living like an American." He talked like a child born here.
>
> "How could you ruin her old age?" said Brave Orchid.
>
> "She has had food. She has had servants. Her daughter went to college. There wasn't anything she thought of that she couldn't buy. I have been a good husband....Look at her. She'd never fit into an American household. I have important American guests who come inside my house to eat." He turned to Moon Orchid, "You can't talk to them. You can barely talk to me." (138-139)

He harshly and cruelly denies Moon Orchid. Yet it is Moon Orchid, in her shock and shame who aptly describes both her husband and herself - "Her husband looked like one of the ghosts passing the car windows, and she must look like a ghost from China. They had indeed entered the land of ghosts, and they had become ghosts." Both Moon Orchid and her husband are depicted as examples of the problems of acculturation and assimilation. Moon Orchid's naive and childlike nature which will not allow her to adapt to the harsh reality of American life and she becomes as incandescent as the paper cutting of Hua Mulan; colourful and beautiful but flimsy and lacking in heroic substance. She slips into madness

and death. Her husband, however, is as insubstantial as a ghost without cultural roots.

The need to talk, to unravel the mysteries and webs of intricate entanglement between two cultures becomes urgent for the writer in the final section of the book "A Song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe". Her narration has now come full circle. By telling and recreating the stories of her ancestral aunt, mother and second aunt, the writer-narrator has heeded the call to understand her Chinese cultural heritage which is rich as well as paradoxical in its exacting demands on its members. Her final metamorphorsis now begins with her difficult and complicated need to tell her own story; a final obstacle to overcome, like the disentanglement of a Chinese knot. The knot as a metaphor plays a dual role, firstly by empowering the narrator with rebellious strength to express her comprehension of events through fleshing out bare and skeletal ideas with elaborate imaginative designs and plots:

> Long ago in China, knot-makers tied string into buttons and frogs, and rope into bell pulls. There was one knot so complicated that it blinded the knot-maker. Finally an emperor outlawed this cruel knot, and the nobles could not order it any more. If I had lived in China, I would have been an outlaw knot-maker. (147)

Secondly, the image itself refers to the idea of extrication, of freeing oneself. Thus, in the deliberate act of voicing out the stories of her ancestresses and finally of herself, she attempts to unravel the contradictions caused by Chinese norms. Therefore, the very concept of telling brings with it a sense of freedom, of literally breaking the shackles of repressive silence imposed by tradition. Interestingly, the writer begins by stating - "[My] silence was thickest - total - during the three years that I covered my school paintings with black paint." (149). Silence, interpreted as the inability to express oneself, is further complicated by shyness. Growing up the author learns quickly that in American school "[t]he other Chinese girls did not talk either, so [she] knew the silence had to do with being a Chinese girl." (150). Chinese practice equates silence in women as well as girls, with modesty, humility and a display of correct behaviour. The narrator's resentment against this cultural norm is obviously displayed in her cruel bullying of her classmate's sister. The character of the classmate's sister becomes the author's alter ego of sorts:

> I hated the younger sister, the quiet one. I hated her when she was the last chosen for her team and I, the last chosen for my team. I hated her for her China doll hair cut. I hated her at music time for the wheezes that came out of her plastic flute.....I hated fragility. I walked around her, looked her up and down the way the Mexican and Negro girls did when they fought, so tough. I hated her weak neck,..... 'Why won't you talk?' I started to cry....I want to know

> why. And you're going to tell me why. You don't see I'm trying to help you out, do you? Do you want to be like this, dumb (do you what dumb means?). your whole life?...Yeah, you're going to have to work because you can't be a housewife. Somebody has to marry you before you can be a housewife. And you, you are a plant. Do you know that? That's all you are if you don't talk. If you don't talk, you can't have a personality. (156, 158, 162)

This litany of hate proves to be a confession albeit an angry one that bespeaks the authorial rejection of the Confucian ideal of womanhood,in particular the quality of silence. The telling gathers momentum when the writer clearly asserts that - "sometimes [she] hated the secrecy of the Chinese." (164). Her mind, dominated by the logic and reasoning method of American and western learning, cannot comprehend the Chinese way of learning where explanations are not given; where traditions are continued through the elaborate display of ritualistic behaviour and the recipient is supposed to learn by mimicry and is never to question:

> Even the good things are unspeakable, so how could I ask about deformities? From the configurations of food my mother set out, we kids had to infer the holidays. She did not whip us up with holiday anticipation or explain. You only remembered that perhaps a year ago you had eaten monks' food, or that there was meat, and it was a meat holiday; or you had eaten moon cakes or long

> noodles for long life (which is a pun).In front of the whole chicken with its slit throat towards the ceiling, she'd lay out just so many pairs of chopsticks alternating with wine cups, which were not meant for us because there were a different number from the number in our family...Mother would pour Seagrams's 7 into the cups and, after a while, pour it back into the bottle. Never explaining. How can Chinese keep any traditions at all? They don't even make you pay attention, slipping in a ceremony and clearing the table before the children notice specialness. The adults get mad, evasive, and shut you up if you ask. You get no warning that you shouldn't wear a white ribbon in your hair until they hit you and give you the sideways glare for the rest of the day. They hit you if you wave brooms around or drop chopsticks or drum them. ..You figure out what you got hit for and don't do it again if you figured correctly....(166)

The need to know coupled with the frustration caused by the inability to express herself induces the author to think herself insane - "I thought talking and not talking made the difference between sanity and insanity" (166). This brings about her belief that her mother has metaphorically cut her tongue off , not allowing her to speak, to silence her. The inability to speak and express herself reaches a climax moment when the narrator's mother rejects her linguistic unburdening. The

final outburst is caused by the need to get rid of the retarded man who seems to be following her about:

> I want you to tell that hulk, that gorilla-ape, to go away and never bother us again. I know what you're up to. ..You think you can give us away to freaks. ..If I see him here one more time, I'm going away. I'm going anyway. I am do you hear me? ...Not everybody thinks I'm nothing. I am not going to be a slave or a wife. Even if I am stupid and talk funny and get sick, I won't let you turn me into a slave or a wife...And I don't want to listen to any more of your stories; they have no logic. They scramble me up. You lie with stories. You won't tell me a story and then say, "This is a true story," or, "This is just a story." I can't tell the difference. I don't even know what your real names are. I can't tell what's real and what you make up... (179-180)

Cathartic in nature, this outburst results in a reconciliation seen in the mother's reply which reveals her confusion at her daughter's actions - " 'You turned out so unusual. I fixed your tongue so you could say charming things. You don't even say hello to the villagers.'" (181). The author-narrator herself concludes:

> The very next day after I talked out the retarded man, the huncher, he disappeared. I never saw him again or heard what became of

> him. Perhaps I made him up, and what I once had was not Chinese-sight at all but child-sight that would have disappeared eventually without such struggle. The throat pain always returns. Though, unless I tell what I really think, whether or not I lose my job, or spit out gaucheries all over a party. (183)

Thus, the narrative which began with the story of the author's ancestral aunt has moved cyclically through the stories of her mother and immediate aunt to finally reach the writer herself. This narration has allowed the author to find links and similarities between herself and the women important in shaping her life. Consequently, the hint of rebellion in the aunt's suicide has been inherited by her mother who rose above her position in China to study and become a midwife. This rebellious spirit is important as a source of strength that the narrator inherits which enables her to understand the tragic nuances of her aunt's madness and in turn allows her to resist the silencing effects of traditional norms, to rise up and speak out. It becomes apt that the association with Ts'ai Yen is brought in at the end, for the narrator has reached out and used a 'barbarian' language to search for and understand the joy and pain of the paradoxes that she inherits from the Chinese culture. And like Ts'ai Yen; she has, through her novel, created a literary expression to articulate her thoughts:

> Ts'ai Yen sang about China and her family there. Her words seemed to be Chinese, but the barbarians understood their sadness

> and anger. Sometimes they thought they could catch barbarian phrases about forever wandering. Her children did not laugh...She brought her songs back from the savage lands, and one of the three that has been passed down to us is 'Eighteen Stanzas for a Barbarian Reed Pipe', a song that Chinese sing to their own instruments. It translated well. (186)

Like Ts'ai Yen creation, the author has in the end to transcend cultural practices to redefine her own identity.