

**DOMINATION OF TRADITION OVER HUMAN RIGHTS IN MAXINE HONG
KINGSTON'S *THE WOMEN WARRIOR: MEMOIRS OF A GIRLHOOD AMONG GHOST***

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Abstract

Human rights are the basic rights and liberty should be given to all humans equally but the rights have been seized partially from particular sections of society. Human rights have been, unfortunately, stamped down under various trivial manmade issues such as racism, casteism, oppression, exploitation, poverty, subjugation of woman, tradition and so on.

When literature ties its knot with human rights it paves not only a way for interdisciplinary reading but also makes the complexities of some issues easier. Literary works with human issues are pictured as mighty medium to empower human rights by complementing each other. The motive of the study is to depict and prove how the rights of human are beaten down by the rights of tradition.

The literary work taken for this study is the memoir of Chinese-American woman writer Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood among Ghosts*. *The Woman Warrior* explores the role of females in the Chinese society which is bounded by culture issues and gender discrimination. The aim of the paper is to probe how the tradition plays a vital role in retrenching humans' basic rights and liberty. Kingston refuses to understand and accept the culture that she is a part of.

Kingston has pictured No name woman and Moon Orchid as the two unfortunate Chinese women who become victims to Chinese tradition. Despite the fact, that in Confucian society women are set / placed below men, Kingston regards Fa Mu Lan (a woman warrior) as her inspiration. Kingston portrays characters who have lost their rights to complain and enjoy freedom of choice. Kingston has proved literature has been and will continue to be the great promoter of human rights. She has raised her voice louder and louder against tradition which curtails human rights.

Human rights are the basic rights and liberty should be given to all humans equally but the rights have been seized partially from particular sections of society. Human rights have, unfortunately, been stamped down under various trivial man-made issues such as racism, casteism, tradition, subjugation of women and so on. When literature ties its knot with human rights, it paves not only a path for interdisciplinary studies but also relaxes the complexities of the issues and makes them comprehensible. Human rights studies are vividly handled as a powerful weapon to shield human rights and charge its foes.

A literary work deals with human issues, shows the moral obligation of the writer and his / her intention to employ it as a mighty medium to restore a better society. The author is driven, on seeing the prevailing social evils, to nullify the struggles of oppressed minorities through his / her works and offers new methodologies to extricate them from the state of oppression. Sartre says, "Literature is a tool which offers a dual action: first as a mirror to the oppressor, and second, as a guide and inspiration to the oppressed." The motive of the study is to depict and prove how the rights of human, especially women, are beaten down by tradition. Let's take a brief glimpse on tradition before probing into the heart of the subject matter.

Tradition is arbitrary, it is an unwritten belief or behaviour pass down within a group or society from generation to generation. The word 'tradition' comes from the Latin word 'traditionem' means the transmission of customs and belief. Tradition plays an indispensable role and becomes the heart of any culture or civilization as it mends human lives morally and ethically. It reinforces ones identity and binds the people with their roots. Traditional values should be kept up to express one's reverence for one's ancestors, heritage, and history and so on. The tradition, which values human development, outstretches its thread to connect both the past and the future ought to be preserved. Though tradition nurtures human lives from all quarters, some customs remain inhuman, partial, and environmentally damaging, must be terminated. Tradition has, basically, been designed to distance women. Women, in any part of the world particularly in Asian countries, have been beheld and treated as sexual objects or slaves and they are prevented from experiencing what liberty is. They are tuned well as puppets in the hands of cruel master tradition. Tradition is envisaged as a shield for women only to preserve their ignorance and to prevent their rightful rights. Letty Cottin Pogrebin, an American author cum journalist, said aptly, "When men are oppressed, it's tragedy. When women are oppressed, it's tradition". Women are expected to be unwise and incapable and treated no better than commodity. Aristotle, an ancient Greek philosopher, says, "A proper wife should be as obedient as a slave...the female is a female by virtue of certain lack of qualities- a natural defectiveness."

Some centuries back women, in Asian countries, limited themselves to home, being dutiful daughter, sister, wife, and mother. They were not given privilege of higher education. They were expected only to learn how to become a proper wife, mother, and housekeeper. But the status of women in Asian countries has been improving gradually over the past few decades; they started extending their exercise outside home to loosen their shackles. The paper focuses on the status of women and how they caught in the bog of tradition and become victims to the tradition and customs. The literary work taken for this study is the memoir of Chinese-American woman writer, Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood among Ghost*. It explores the affliction of women in China which is firmly established by rigid tradition and customs. A highly acclaimed memoirist, Maxine Hong Kingston has written three novels and several works of non-fiction about the experiences of Chinese immigrants living in the

United States. She received many honours including the National Humanities Medals and the John Dos Passos prize for literature. Her first book, *The Woman Warrior*, won the National Book Critics Circle Award in 1976. Kingston's works bridge two civilizations (Chinese and American) and their social and familial bonds from ancient China to contemporary California. She is both praised and criticized for her writing style by literary critics. It is regarded as a product of the civil rights and women's liberation.

The Woman Warrior delineates different shades of adversities and raw pain they experience in their day to day life. It recounts the story of Kingston's paternal aunt who killed herself and her new born baby by jumping into the family well. She is forgotten and forsaken by her family members as she brought disgrace to her family. Kingston named her aunt No Name Woman has become pregnant while her husband is in America by incestuous relationship. The night when she is about to deliver, the enraged villagers have rampaged the family house.

"They ripped up her clothes and broke her combs, grinding them underfoot. They tore her work from the loom. They scattered the cooking fire and rolled the new weaving in it. We could hear them in the kitchen beaking our bowls and banging the pots. They overturned the great waist-high earthenware jugs; duck eggs pickled fruits, vegetables burst out and mixed in acrid torrents. The old woman from the next field swept a broom through the air and loosed the spirits-of-the broom over our heads. "pigs." "Ghost." "Pig," they sobbed and scolded while they ruined our house." (12)

It states that lust is socially denied as it disrupts well maintained social order. She has delivered a girl baby in a pigsty all alone. She said, "A child with no descent line would not soften her life but only trail after her." "She hardened her breasts against the milk that crying loosens. Towards morning she picked up the baby and walked to the well." (21) It has been said that Brave Orchid, Kingston's Mother, found her sister-in-law and the "baby plugging up the family well." Suicide is not uncommon in China. It is preferred by Chinese women to escape the hard realities for various reasons. A mother who loves her children takes them along so she decided to shelter her daughter from inhuman customs. "It was probably a girl; there is some hope of forgiveness for boys." (21) The people in China, particularly women have no choice to have private life or to select partners on their own. Brave Orchid unveils the forgotten and hidden truth about No Name Woman to Kingston, not with a sympathetic note but only as a cautionary tale to warn her when she has begun to menstruate. Kingston is torn between the rigid world of China and the glossy permissive America.

China, being shaped by Confucius philosophy, expects women to maintain silence, play a passive role. It is illustrated how the subjugation begins in the very first line of the text by the words of Brave Orchid, "You must not tell anyone" "what I am about to tell you." Kingston is also forbidden from knowing more details about her aunt. Kingston has invented her own fantasies based on her mother's talk stories. In that scenario, No Name Woman is sketched as a timid woman who might have become a prey to a rapist. Kingston believes that her aunt would not have chosen immoral life as she has been brought up in a conventional society. On knowing, the enraged villagers have attacked the family house, slaughter all domestic animals kept in livestock, and driven her to suicide. But, there is no reference anywhere whether her inseminator has been accused or punished for his crime. The narrator reveals the bitter truth, "In a commensal tradition, where food is precious, the powerful old people made wrongdoers eat alone." (14) No Name Woman was punished not only by her family members but also by the

villagers. Kingston said, "Adultery, perhaps only a mistake during good times, became a crime when the village needed food." "If my aunt had betrayed the family at a time of large grain yields and peace, when many boys were born...perhaps she might have escaped such severe punishment."(19) But, it happened when the men were "hungry, greedy, tired of planting in dry soil." This incident discloses the superstitious belief of Chinese who believed that her infidelity has already harmed and cursed the village with the waves of consequences such as flood, plagues, and war with Japan.

Chinese women are raised in accordance with Chinese tradition where the birth of a girl is dispensable whereas the birth of a boy is joyfully celebrated. Daughters are referred as outsiders as they bring no economic benefits to the family. In China, female children undergo many callous inhuman practices. Foot binding, one such terrible act was in practice, experience by Brave Orchid's mother and grandmothers, to dehumanise and humiliate women. This relentless practice was traditionally acknowledged to make them to comprehend that they were lesser than humans. It is illustrated as: "My mother said we were lucky we didn't have our feet bound when we were seven." "She said, as their mothers or their slaves removed the bandages for a few minutes each night and let the blood gush back into their veins." (16)

Chinese women hardly enjoy any rights, on the other hand men in China are allowed to commit adultery, divorce, remarry, and be polygamous. The same community "smeared bad daughters-in-law with honey and tied them naked on top of ant nests." "A husband may kill a wife who disobeys him."(173) Away from China, the Chinese immigrant parents wish to raise their children by talk stories and expect them to show their reverence and inherit their cultural traits. At the same time, they refuse to share the same and made their children to fluctuate between the two cultures and thus let their identity unanswered.

It is a belief in Chinese culture to honour and comfort ancestors after their demise, but No Name Woman is deliberately forsaken by her family. They let her down to suffer eternally even after her death for food and other requisite from other ghosts. "The real punishment was not the raid swiftly inflicted by the villagers, but the family's deliberately forgetting her." (22) The Chinese people opined that girls are useless and burdensome. Kingston would wish to scream so hard when ever the girls are addressed 'maggots' and she is aggravated by the following words, but she could not stop them as she is silenced: "It is more profitable to raise geese than daughters." "Feeding girls is feeding cow birds." (48) The relationship between a man and a woman, in China, juxtaposes the relationship between a master and a slave. They get united through matrimony not out of love but only with the hope of begetting more and more sons.

Women in China experience innumerable catastrophe in the name of tradition. Despite these difficulties they raise not their voice either out of pain or to condemn but endure unspeakable pain. Brave Orchid has described how female babies are often killed mercilessly, after being born. Girl babies are smothered by midwives in heap of ashes. If they escape the clutches of death luckily, they have been displayed in the market places for sale, where Brave Orchid beheld "Some of the dealers merely had the children bow quietly-- other had them sing a happy song about flowers"(76). When Brave Orchid wishes to have a better slave girl, she has examined the displayed girls as: "open your mouth" and "examined teeth, she pulled down eyelids to check for anemia. She picked up the girls' wrists to sound their pulses, which tells everything." (76) Kingston could not digest the whole of the Chinese system where "Poor people snagging their neighbours' floatage with long flood hooks and pushing the girl babies on down the river." (53)

Through out the study, it is shown how the tradition over rules human rights, that is, women rights at every phase. It curtails the very basic rights of women from all quarters and how their voices are muted by the bogus tradition. Robert G. Ingersoll says, "The true civilization is where every human gives to every other man every rights he claims for himself." The article brings forth the sufferings of the woman in particular and general. Kingston has proved, literature has been and will continue to be the great promoter of human rights. She has raised her voice louder and louder against tradition which curbs human rights. Kingston employs *The Woman Warrior* as a tool, to propagate the social evils against women who are stuck in the dark world of tradition, seeking a ray of hope to relish the Sun shine in their life.

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