

# Maxine Hong Kingston, Ghostbuster Feminist

By Zoila Clark, Florida Atlantic University, USA

## Abstract:

Maxine Hong Kingston is a first generation Chinese-American writer who became recognized after the publication of *The Woman Warrior, Memoirs of a Girlhood among Ghosts* in 1976. In this study, I argue that Kingston's book of the uncanny draws on Chinese-American women's writing in order to construct the role-model of a bicultural Ghostbuster feminist able to fight the ghosting patriarchal policies of the US. By contextualizing second wave feminism and women's writing in the 1970s, we can observe that Kingston's writing style is part of *écriture féminine*, and that this helped her overcome her bicultural uncanny experience.

1 After three and a half decades of being published, critics still debate whether *The Woman Warrior, Memoirs of a Girlhood among Ghosts* (1976) is a fictitious story or not. Maxine Hong Kingston invites us to be the judge when we open up the covers of her controversial book<sup>1</sup> and share her uncanny experiences as a first generation American girl growing up in a family of Chinese immigrants from the 1940s to the 1970s. In this study, I argue that Kingston's 1976 book of the uncanny draws on Chinese-American women's writing in order to construct the role model of a bicultural Ghostbuster feminist<sup>2</sup> able to fight the ghosting patriarchal policies of the US. By contextualizing second wave feminism and women's writing in the 1970s,<sup>3</sup> we can observe that Kingston's writing style is part of *écriture féminine*, and that this helped her overcome her bicultural uncanny experience.

2 In 1975, when Hélène Cixous's essay "The Laugh of the Medusa" became a feminist manifesto for the women's movement, she coined the term *écriture féminine* to describe her literary approach. This embraces the idea that women need to find their own way of writing in order to hear their voice and break free from the kinds of linear scientific thinking which is rooted in masculine pleasure and modes of creation. Her essay gave rise to what is now known as post-structural feminism, igniting, as it did in the 70s and 80s, a new generation of feminist writing that experimented with *écriture féminine*. Among other creative writers, this group includes Chantal Chawaf, Catherine Clément, Luce Irigaray, Mary Daly, Trinh T.

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<sup>1</sup> As a child, Kingston used to paint back curtains over her colorful drawings as if they were theatrical presentations with sets waiting on the other side. Once she learned to speak English, "I wrote that the curtains rose or swung apart" (Huntley 7)

<sup>2</sup> I took this term from the film *Ghostbusters* (1984) because Maxine Hong Kingston had already created a heroine that busted ghosts in the USA in 1976

<sup>3</sup> During the 70s, some feminists became interested in language and post-structuralism. A group of feminists who use Derrida's theory of deconstruction to create women's writing are wrongly identified as French Feminists. However, they are not all French

Minh-ha, as well as Maxine Hong Kingston. *Écriture féminine* is an individual way of writing that seeks to reconnect the subject with the pre-symbolic *jouissance*<sup>4</sup> we enjoyed in our mother's womb. The modernists,<sup>5</sup> whose work is non-linear, cyclical, symbolic, and musical, received favorable mention from Cixous, who considered them worthy forerunners of *écriture féminine*. A central principle and point of departure for Cixous, however, is that the content must be related to women's identity, a sentiment she articulates at the outset: "Woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies" ("The Laugh" 2039). This is what Kingston does with her *Woman Warrior* in 1976. She shows us the process of creating her bicultural identity in a non-linear way by use of pre-symbolic ghostly dream images about the fear of being raped and ostracized after the onset of menstruation, and ends her book with a song, or poetic story, where she admits that while the beginning is her mother's, the ending is hers.

3      Trinh-T. Minh-ha, as a feminist of color like Kingston, considers that a woman of color, in

un-learning the dominant language of 'civilized' missionaries also has to learn how to un-write and write anew. And she often does so by re-establishing the contact with her foremothers, so that living tradition can never congeal into fixed forms, so that life keeps on nurturing life, so that what is understood as the Past continues to provide the link for the Present and the Future. [...] Each woman does it through storytelling, the oldest form of building historical consciousness in community. (148-49)

Being bilingual, Kingston learns and un-learns two languages and cultures, Chinese and English, in order to find her own voice. Telling us her story in different versions, she re-establishes a connection with her ghosted foremother, an aunt who was forced to commit incest, suicide, and filicide in China in 1924. In so doing, Kingston demonstrates that Chinese tradition is not fixed, but reconstructed and transformed because the past, the present and the future are interconnected spaces from which we draw memories that become the narratives of our identity as individuals and members of a community. History has commonly been presented as the official fixed story, or guardian of traditions, that protects our identity and without which we would lose our sense of self. Kingston's response to these conventions is to write her self through talk-story, a technique to recall memories she learned from her mother which bestows on the individual the power to know themselves and create their own

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<sup>4</sup> In French, *jouissance* means pleasure or enjoyment. It has a feminine sexual connotation of the mother's body, which is multi-orgasmic.

<sup>5</sup> Modernists used the stream of consciousness technique to dive into the unconscious and write without censorship. They also used a poetic style, which is in tune with the pre-symbolic.

identities in the face of social pressure that might haunt them from past traditions, present oppressive social structures, or somebody else's future goals. She succeeds in reconnecting with her female ancestors in order to create a cyclical and spiral view of individual and collective history.

4 Stories are like pieces we use to build our identity, and this concept of talk-story is the binding agent that holds it together. Immigrants like Kingston constantly need to negotiate their identities with memories of stories at the interstice of time and space, a literary chronotope.<sup>6</sup> Even though Kingston was born in California, her past is bound up with China to the extent that she grew up listening to her mother's talk-stories of Chinese women's patriarchal socialization. Not all her mother's stories were, however, oppressive; for instance, she remembers this turning point in her life: "[My mother] said I would grow up a wife and a slave, but she taught me the song of the warrior woman, *Fa Mu Lan*. I would have to grow up a warrior woman" (20). The myth of *Fa Mu Lan* has different versions, and Kingston chooses to focus on the process of strengthening since the narrator's voice is that of a young girl who has chosen her destiny as a hero that will do combat with her fears in the form of ghosts from the past, the present, and the future. Upon reading this tale, I realized that Kingston had written the story of a young girl Ghostbuster before the Ghostbusters films were made in the 1980s. The main character of her story, Maxine, becomes a worthy figure of heroic behavior for all US immigrants, especially women of color, who then tell their stories in books such as *Warrior Woman: A Journal of my Life as an Artist* (1992), *When Women Were Warriors* (2008), and *Women Warriors of the Afro-Latina Diaspora* (2012).

5 Ghosts are generally related to the repressed and denied, and, for Cixous, what is repressed and feared in the unconscious mind is women's sexuality because this has been expelled or ghosted even from their own bodies, which they themselves fear and find monstrous. She considers that women are able to gain individual and collective liberation by breaking the silence with their own speech and their own "songs," just as Kingston had done when, as Maxine the Warrior, she had fought her ghosts with laughter ("The Laugh" 2043-45). Humor, in this instance, seems to be a key strategy for overcoming the fear of our double self as a Medusa and for helping us to stop seeing ourselves through the lens of patriarchy. "You only have to see at the Medusa straight on to see her. And she's not deadly. She's beautiful and she's laughing" ("The Laugh" 2048), concludes Cixous, aided, in her manifesto, by an uncanny experience. *Écriture féminine* takes the reader to uncanny places,

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<sup>6</sup> A term coined by M. Bakhtin to describe the way time and space are described by language, and, in particular, how literature represents them.

and this is a concept we will explore when looking for uncanny experiences of immigration in *The Woman Warrior* book.

6       Uncanny is the English translation of *unheimlich*, a German term that was coined in 1906 by Ernst Jentsch. Jentsch makes no attempt to define the essence of what he calls the uncanny, stating instead that “such a conceptual explanation would have very little value. The main reason for this is that the same impression does not necessarily exert an uncanny effect on everybody” (2). In other words, the phenomenological and individualized nature of the experience in different cultures makes it difficult to tie down. For him, the uncanny “appears to express that someone to whom something ‘uncanny’ happens is not quite ‘at home’ or ‘at ease’ in the situation concerned, that the thing is or at least seems to be foreign to him” (2). By 1919, however, Freud does make an attempt to define the concept from a universal and scientific western perspective, but in its translation into various languages, the term became overly abstruse and we were left with an incomplete list of additional characteristics.

7       The copycat Chinatowns Chinese-Americans recreate become uncanny because the social rules, people, objects, and culture cannot be the same. It is an unhomely home where anything can happen. In fact, Chinese-Americans experienced severe discrimination before World War II; it was not until the 1930s that merchants were able to bring their wives and another decade before the US government finally repealed the Chinese Exclusion Act, by which no Chinese woman could enter the country (Nakano Glenn & Yap 142). Kingston’s mother was lucky to have been brought into the US by her husband after she lost her two babies back in China as a result of not being able to feed them. Most Chinese males had to go back to China to have children because there were no mixed marriages allowed either. Kingston’s grandmother was able to come because she pretended to have a paper son<sup>7</sup> that could enter the US.

8       The intolerability of erasing boundaries is echoed among immigrants and US bicultural residents, and presents itself in different ways. For instance, they are supposed to share their daily lives as equals in a society that denies them citizenship and the rights that come with that status, and once outside the legal system, they become ghostly.<sup>8</sup> Besides, they are accompanied by their Chinese ancient ghosts and meet new American ghosts when they realize that they are supposed to live alienated in a reality parallel to that of American residents.

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<sup>7</sup> A term coined for young Chinese males attempting to enter the US on identity papers that were brought for them. They were sons in paper only.

<sup>8</sup> This scenario is, incidentally, reversed when it comes to Chinatown communities, where the ghosts are the Americans.

9 For the Kingstons, the process of migration itself turns out to be both nightmarish and ghost-ridden, and, upon arrival, the family is afflicted by a hunger that extends beyond that of food to include lack of affection in a country indifferent to their cultural upbringing and which expects them to become Americans overnight. Their sense of alienation is expressed in the appearance of ghosts throughout the text. Kingston's childhood memoirs are filled with ghosts, which may explain her eventual career choice of Ghostbuster. She forges this identity from tales of various heroic female ancestors in her own family before engaging in combat with ghosts, a mission that even involves de-ghosting herself. The parallels between life versus death and one race versus another are highlighted by Allen Guttman's observation that, "racial discrimination exists under the assumption of imaginary borders that created barriers between people of different race, just as the immigrant borders that exist between the living and the dead" (188-89). In the light of these comments, the connection he makes between Edgar Allan Poe's horror stories and Ralph Ellison's *The Invisible Man* (1952) is well made. Maxine, Kingston's narrator and alter ego, makes a similar connection to tell us the stories of how she dealt with her uncanny fears in the US by focusing on five different ghosts in each chapter. Sometimes it is necessary to find reconciliation with the past, but ghosts that represent patriarchal assaults on our well-being must be defeated.

10 Worthy of note at this juncture is the evidence that early forms of ancestor veneration were deeply rooted and developed by the Late Neolithic Period in China. According to Kristeva, Confucian philosophy "will be founded precisely on this cult of ancestor worship, finding in it a solid base for the construction of a rationalist morality with a strong paternal authority and a complex hierarchy" (*About* 70). In this way, the elderly were always respected, even after death, and the Confucian patriarchal order cautioned that those who strayed from the path of righteous respect for their elders doomed them to walk the earth as hungry ghosts<sup>9</sup> as a result of their not being fed in rituals by the living. These beliefs formed the inspiration from which all kinds of ghosts were created. They also exerted an influence over the two religions, Buddhism and Taoism, which incorporated ancient matriarchal spiritualism into their belief systems.<sup>10</sup> Women become powerful only in old age as mothers-in-law, when they assumed the mantle of manly soldiers entrusted to protect the patriarchal

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<sup>9</sup> Confucian morality uses the hungry ghost story of Buddha's discourse on The Scripture of the Spell for Saving the Burning-Mouth Hungry Ghost, a ritual to the ancestors that later started the medieval ghost festival in China in the eighth century. However, the idea of making peace with the ancestors existed in previous Buddhist texts: The Yulanpen Scripture and The Scripture for Offering Bowls to Repay Kindness. Manuals for the hungry ghost ritual were created in 1315 concerning the salvation of suffering beings (Orzech 279).

<sup>10</sup> Most divinities and ghosts are female.

order, or, after death, the role of ghost avengers. Such a figure is the first ghost that appears in Kingston's uncanny book.

11 "No Name Woman" is the title of Maxine's first memoir. The title refers to a woman who, instead of belonging to the symbolic<sup>11</sup> order of the law of the father, is somebody who has been abjected from it, according to Kristeva's psychoanalytic theory. For Hetty Lanier Keaton, this "Chinese aunt is left hungry both because the family refuses to talk about her and because the family refuses to make food offerings to her ghost" (37). Her sin was to get pregnant while her husband was away. After being humiliated by villagers in her own house, she committed suicide and filicide by drawing and poisoning the drinking water, a crime for which she was then rejected by her family, who denied her existence and erased her from memory. She suffers the trauma of hearing these words thrown in her face: "Pig. Ghost. Pig. They sobbed and scolded while they ruined the house" (5). Maxine appropriates the words No Name Woman to give her a name to bring her back into the symbolic realm and a Chinese paper offering by printing her story. She retells the story many times, all the while changing the circumstances of her aunt's pregnancy with each version before finally turning her mother's tragic memory into a rebellious one; individualistic by nature, her aunt is unfaithful to her husband by having a relationship with and then a child from another man. No Name Woman is now part of a modern community that understands the fear and social control of women's sexuality. Her story provides healing medicine to abjected women like her, and the Chinese hungry ghost gets busted away.

12 The second ghost is also Chinese. The heroine *Fa Mu Lan*, is a girl that haunts Maxine's mind in a positive way because the experience inspires her to become a strong swordswoman who protects her family and village in the end. She realizes that the bird she should follow is not really a bird, but her own desires. This story details a rite of passage in which Maxine learns to be patient with her parents, who, while unable to train her themselves on account of being Chinese, nonetheless do their best to prepare her for a successful life in the United States, one that does not entail her becoming a slave or a wife, but rather an independent career woman as a writer. Isabel Capeloa Gil makes the remarkable observation that valor in a woman has been considered monstrous in western culture ever since Homer's *Illiad* and Virgil's *Aeneid* (229-31), which was why Kingston turned to the Chinese *Fa Mu*

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<sup>11</sup> The symbolic is a way of signifying whatever depends on language as a sign system, complete with its grammar and syntax, while the semiotic is a way of signifying that which depends on bodily energy and performance, such as music, dance, poetry, and it is connected to the unconscious and emotional responses. No Name Woman belonged to the semiotic realm when feared as a ghost because she performed suicide and vengeance; however, Kingston brings her back to the symbolic realm by writing her story consciously and making her part of the social cultural order.

*Lan* as her role model for female strength. Stella Bolaki notices that this character is fortified still further by other sources: “Kingston blends *Fa Mu Lan*’s legend with the story of Yue Fei, a male general of the Sung dynasty, from which she borrows the word-carving episode” (45). This detail sheds light on Maxine’s linguistic and symbolic method of busting ghosts. The tools of conflict have evolved, and whereas sword fights were the norm in medieval times, words have taken over as the weapons of choice in the modern era, and it is with these that Kingston fights for justice on behalf of Chinese immigrants. This explains why Maxine ends up saying that she and *Fa Mu Lan* are similar: “what we have in common are the words at our backs” (53).

13 The third spirit is Chinese Hairy Sitting Ghost, who, we learn, overcomes her victims by means of a “suffocating, paralyzing weight” (Sato 141). She is, however, defeated by Maxine’s mother, Brave Orchid, who, we learn, goes to study in the city of Canton alone while her husband remains in the US. Her decision to enter the masculine-dominated public sphere triggers her insecurities of not being able to succeed, but, once more, she manages to prevail over the ghost through the use of language rather than brute force. Her technique involves screaming at the ghost, “defeating him with the boldness of her word and the power of the images she voices to taunt him into submission and cowardice” (Smith 239). No one will ever put her down. She encourages all her female classmates to burn the monstrous ghost and thus put an end to their fears of ignorance. Once the ghost has been put to rest, she entreats them to find the courage to pursue their studies and gain knowledge at the university. As a Shaman or Ghostbuster like her mother, Maxine realizes that ghosts do not only originate from the old Chinese patriarchal past, but that her present in the US has “machines and ghosts— Taxi Ghosts, Bus Ghosts, Police Ghosts, Fire Ghosts, Meter Reader Ghosts, Five-and-Dime Ghosts [...] White Ghosts, Black Ghosts [...] Gypsy Ghosts” (96-7). She leaves the reader to consider that whatever and whoever creates barriers creates abjection, a syndrome that resurfaces in the following memoir.

14 The fourth ghosting experience is bicultural. It symbolizes the abjection inflicted by the American people as well as by all other assimilated immigrants upon Chinese people like Maxine’s aunt, Moon Orchid. She lacks the courage of her sister, Brave Orchid, and loses her mind after her husband tells her he never wants to see her again. At that moment, “her husband looked like one of the ghosts passing the car windows, and she must look like a ghost from China” (153). She ends up finding greater happiness in a mental home, where other inmates, those able to speak her language and understand her, become her daughters. Communication is thus important for her well-being, and this aunt becomes the anti-model

for the family because “all her children made up their minds to major in science or mathematics” (160), instead of dedicating their love to undeserving men.

15 The fifth ghost is Chinese-American. It manifests itself when Maxine comes to terms with her own silent ghost identity. Unfortunately, she mirrors herself in another Chinese immigrant who is also silent and she bullies this immigrant to the point of tears. She says she hates her on account of all the things she did to herself when she was younger and that the immigrant should learn to speak out and stop the violence. However, that little girl is not ready, and she has to suffer Maxine’s rage against her passivity. We may observe a correlation between this event and Kristeva’s theory of abjection in which she says: “I expel myself, I spit myself out, I abject myself within the same motion through which ‘I’ claim to establish myself” (*Powers* 3). The guilt she feels after this purge makes her sick for a whole year. Facing her own ghost causes her to speak angrily to her mother and tell her that instead of accepting the role of a passive Chinese, she will choose to be a strong Chinese-American woman who pursues a career and will not agree to an arranged marriage like various other female members of the family who ended up losing their minds. She achieves a moral victory when, after recalling another of her mother’s stories, she changes the ending by making the female character Ts’ai Yen a well-adjusted person who celebrates her bi-cultural background communally. Kingston asserts that: “the beginning is hers, the ending, mine” (206), just as she does in her uncanny book *The Woman Warrior*.

16 Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior* can be considered both a healing text and a *Bildungsroman* because the narrator moves from a sense of fear occasioned by her unknown roots to a discovery of and reconciliation with her past. By identifying herself with the warrior *Fa Mu Lan* and other strong women like her, she fights against discrimination and abjection in her refusal both to be a ghost and to feel haunted by them. On her journey, she is able to include many cases of women whose traditional feminine identity and helpless dependency on male supremacy leave them unable to exorcise their ghosts. In the last two chapters we find women who lose their sanity, like her mother’s sister, Moon Orchid. The courage to conquer our demons, we learn, is not an innate quality, but one that may be acquired through persistence, a lesson exemplified in the life of Maxine’s mother, who became Brave Orchid after fighting a Sitting Ghost. This specter provides a symbol of



patriarchal oppression that prevailed at the university where she studied medicine, a career typically considered masculine territory at the beginning of the 20th century.<sup>12</sup>

17 Moon Orchid's life has none of the panache of her sister's. Disinclined to act on her own initiative, she never does anything for herself and depends on the money being sent to her by her husband in the US. Her sister, Brave Orchid, takes her to confront him face to face, but she is not able to answer back to his humiliating remarks, which define her as a ghost: "I have a new wife [...] 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" (153). For Moon Orchid, dismay is replaced by paranoia when she says: "Don't come see me because the Mexican ghosts will follow you to my new hiding place. They are watching your house" (155). Such a family case history seems to be common in Chinatown. Female neighbors such as Pee-A-Nah, the village idiot and the witch, whose antics prompt Maxine to make the following personal observation: "I thought every house had to have its crazy woman or crazy girl, every village its idiot. Who would be It at our house? Probably me" (189). Madness is among a woman's worst fears because in rendering her totally dependent on either family or community, it transforms her into an automaton, a ghost, a nobody excluded from the symbolic world of ordered civilization to be used and abused in a world where manly reason prevails over the body. It is to prevent this downward slide into vacuity that Cixous says: "Woman must write her self" ("The Laugh" 2039).

18 Kingston is successful in abiding by Cixous' principle to the extent that she takes evasive action against losing her own mind, and her independence of mind saves her from the insanity that overcomes Moon Orchid and Pee-A-Nah. In so doing, Kingston manages to write her self. Maybe her listening to Chinese-Ghost stories<sup>13</sup> helps her see the ghost-immigrant or bicultural identity connection. Kingston creates her alter ego narrator, a young girl called Maxine, who trains herself to become her own heroine and avoids being ghosted in the US. She achieves heroic stature when she tells a story in her own words using *écriture*

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<sup>12</sup> Kingston's mother was only able to study a feminine branch of medicine, midwifery, before Mao's socialist plan encouraged women to become professional doctors in 1949. Mrs. Kingston could not find a medical school for women in her town, so she moved to the city of Canton to study at Keung School of Midwifery. According to Benjamin K. P. Leung, it is hard to comprehend the full extent of women's oppression and misery under patriarchal values during pre-industrial China before the 1950s. The deprivations and discrimination they experienced can be inferred from the few studies of special categories of women in the early twenty century (23-4). Maxine Hong Kingston was fortunate to have been born in California in 1940 to first-generation Chinese immigrants.

<sup>13</sup> Chinese ghost literature had its golden period from 1580 to 1700 and Western ghost literature flourished from 1700 to 1900. However, we might be witnessing a rebirth of the multicultural gothic in the twentieth first century.

*feminine*, busting her own ghosts in uncanny territories and coming back full circle to hold the deserved laurel.

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