

Enhanced Tragedy—Changing Point of View in *The Woman Warrior*

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Abstract—*The Woman Warrior* is the first book of Maxine Hong Kingston. In this book, there are different narrators in telling the stories. As a deviance, in the fourth chapter, *At the Western Palace*, the third person narration presents a more vivid and impressive story. This deviance enhances the tragic end of the protagonists.

Index Terms—Kingston, *The Woman Warrior*, point of view, third-person narrator

As the first book of Maxine Hong Kingston, *The Woman Warrior* wins her much fame. Kingston is a Chinese American, born in 1940. The book is about her girlhood as it is affected by the beliefs of her family. She intends to publish it as a novel, but the publisher labels it as nonfiction. However, it sells well and wins the National Book Critic Circle Award for the best work of nonfiction in 1976. In this book, there are different narrators in telling the stories of her childhood. The author uses third person narration to enhance the tragedy of the protagonists, both Moon Orchid and Brave Orchid. With the deviance, the readers can feel the tragic end of Moon.

Because *The Woman Warrior* is published as nonfiction, critics hold different opinions about the genre of the book. According to Anne Tyler (1989) in the *New Republic*, “in a deeper sense, they are fiction at its best – novels, fairytales, epic poems” (p. 44). But other critics do agree with the publishers and think it is better to treat it as nonfiction. In limited sense, Outka (1997) thinks it is autobiography, a genre that mixes fact and fiction (p. 448). Outka’s opinion has some evidences. The book is partly based on the stories of Kingston’s mother. Actually, Brave Orchid refers to Kingston’s mother in the book. Her mother married her father before he moved to America. She stayed in China for many years before his father sent for her. Their two children in China died before she moved to America. Kingston is the first children of her mother in America. Though Kingston mixes some fantasies in the book, but it does not remove the basic essence of the book. It is better to have it as an autobiography than a fiction.

The book is divided into five chapters. The first chapter is “No Name Woman.” It tells the story of an aunt who committed suicide. She is so obscure that she could not have a name. She is accursed for giving birth to a girl. In general sense, she is accursed because her adultery. But Outka (1997) holds that the reason for her guilty is that she creates a mouth to feed in a time of scarcity (p. 453). It shows some affairs have not only moral sense, but also some other meaning. In the second chapter, “White Tigers,” Kingston rewrites *The Ballad of Mulan* in her imagination and combines stories from different sources in Chinese history and culture. In “Shaman,” it tells her mother’s story in China. In “At the Western Palace,” it tells another story about an aunt. Brave Orchid encourages her sister, Moon Orchid, to come to America and see her husband. They use their imagination to plan a meeting. The meeting is short and the story ends in the madness of Moon Orchid. In the last story, “A Song for a Barbarian Reed Ripe,” Kingston rewrites the story of a poetess. Except the fourth chapter, “At the Western Palace,” the stories are told by *I*, first-person narrator. In the 4th chapter, the voice of the third-person narrator gives the readers alienation and presents different opinions of different people. With the shift of narrators, the reader knows more about what the protagonists think and development of their minds. By the end of the story, it is the madness of Moon Orchid convinced the feeling.

At the beginning of “At the Western Palace,” there comes the third-person narrator. It changes from *I* in the previous chapter to an omniscient narrator. Here, the protagonists are mentioned by their names: “When she was about sixty-eight years old, Brave Orchid took a day off” (Kingston, 1977, p. 113). It is quite different from the previous chapters. In the previous chapter, Brave Orchid is just mentioned as “my mother.” The third-person narrator is the omniscience. He knows everything of the protagonists. It helps to know quite well the development of the protagonists in the story.

Brave Orchid’s was waiting for her sister, Moon Orchid, at the airport. The third-person narrator tells that Brave is known as having some magic power. She can concentrate her mind in her sister’s plane in order to help her arrive America safely. During waiting, she also shares some of her power to her son, who is serving the army in Vietnam. Though other children tries to tell her that he is in the Philippines, but she knows he is on a ship in Da Nang. Nothing could escape from her consciousness. It is mysterious that a woman can do such kind of thing. It is much like witchcraft of a magician. But it comes from a Chinese descendent. With the change of point of view, the author presents Brave Orchid as a whole new role to the reader, quite different from the mother mentioned before. It is believable that she has some mysterious power and can hand all affairs. If the story is told by the first-person narrator, it is doubtful that she actually has the magical power. But the voice of the third-person narrator convinces the readers that she has those

powers. When the readers come to know that she can do nothing with her sister's madness, they ask where her magic power is. It makes a sharp contrast between the impressions of Brave Orchid in the past and present.

In telling the story, the third-person shows the influence of different culture. While Brave is sitting there waiting for her sister, her niece is sitting and accompanying her waiting. She is brought up in China and installed traditional Chinese culture. She has patience and can do something with endurance. But Brave's American children are quite different. "They didn't understand sitting; they had wandering feet" (Kingston, 1977, p. 113). They just wander where they could. In their minds, it is better to go to some other places than to stay at the same places. Brave knows quite well about her children and the difference between her children and her niece. The third-person narrator is more objective than the first-person narrator. Not only *I* can see the cultural difference, but also all people can see it. The cultural difference is very important in the story. As Moon Orchid grows up in China and is instilled the traditional Chinese culture, she has to face a different culture when she steps on the land of America. Brave Orchid and Moon's daughter have successfully lived in America. Brave Orchid still holds her Chinese belief and uses it as a weapon in the struggle with the American culture, as she keeps look the American as ghosts. Moon's daughter reserves her Chinese belief, absorbs the American culture and mixes them together. But for Moon Orchid, it is doubtful if she can face the cultural difference. She is not young and leads a peaceful life in China. If her husband does not accept her, she will face the pressure of life. If she can bear such kind of change, no one can tell.

Almost immediately after Moon's arriving, Brave Orchid eagerly talks with her and plans to meet her husband and claim her right as the first wife. There is a fierce debate between. Brave Orchid thinks it is quite right to go to Moon's husband's house and claim she is his first wife. She could occupy the bedroom as the traditional Chinese does. Brave Orchid thinks that Chinese traditional ideas can also survive in America. The survival of her is a good example. Anyhow, her success depends on her husband's support. There is another important factor: when she came America, she is still in her forties. Now, Moon Orchid is in her sixties when she comes America. But for Moon, she is doubtful. Her husband continues to send her money but never send for her. Now she didn't tell him that she comes. It is a great adventure for her. She has broken her peaceful life. Without Brave's encouragement and help, she probably would never come here. At this time, she is even scared to go back to Hong Kong. In fact, she is not so strong as Brave does. When Brave says it is right to claim his two sons, she doubts about it. Though she hopes to regain her husband, she still doubts about the way Brave has suggested. She hopes it is the idea from her husband better than she asks for it herself. In her opinion, she prefers to keep silence and wait. The discussion between two sisters shows that different attitudes of people towards new environment and culture. Brave Orchid represents positive and aggressive attitude, and Moon Orchid represents passive and conservative attitude. They can be treated as two sides of one culture.

Without any definite decision, Moon stays with Brave and her family for some time. Before she meets her husband, she needs some time to adopt herself with a new life. She goes to Brave's laundry and tries to do something there. Because Moon has a leisure life in the past, though she is eager to get some work to do, she couldn't do well. Brave tries to put Moon at different works, but only finds that Moon Orchid cannot match the others. At last, she only folds the handkerchiefs. She is too old for a job. During her stay with them, Moon always observes Brave's children. Sometimes, she imitates their words. "She says, 'Aunt, please take your finger out of the batter,' Moon Orchid repeated as she turned to follow another niece walking through the kitchen" (Kingston, 1977, p. 140). At other times, she describes them:

"She's brushing her teeth. Now she's coming out of the bathroom. She's wearing the blue dress and a white sweater. She'd combed her hair and washed her face. She looks in the refrigerator and is arranging things between slices of bread. She's putting an orange and cookies in a bag. Today she's taking her green book and her blue book. And tablets and pencils." (Kingston, 1977, p. 141)

Because the use third-person narration, her action is under all people's eyes. It is strange for all people that she does such kind of things. Her action, in some case, looks like a child. It happens in several places when Moon stays with Brave's children. Moon Orchid is trying to learn her new life. She has her own way, but it is not quite good as the others hope. No one can do help. Even Brave Orchid does nothing help. In contrast with her power to support plane, she cannot give a hand in her sister's learning. The life with Brave Orchid's family is quiet and tolerable. Moon Orchid still bears it. She still has hope that her husband will accept her when she meets him. It is the only support in her mind and keeps her learning the new life.

Life with Brave Orchid's family does not last long. In the middle of summer, under the suggestion of Moon's daughter, Brave asks her son to drive them to Los Angeles. On their way, Brave tells Moon the legend of the Earth's Emperor. Brave thinks that Moon's husband is the Emperor in the legend. He is imprisoned in the western palace by the Empress of the west who connives for power. And Moon is the Empress in the east palace comes to rescue (Kingston, 1977, p. 143). This is the imagination in Brave Orchid's mind. The reality is not what she has imagined. Moon's husband has started a new life long ago and has a successful profession. He is better to live with his second wife better than with Moon. When they meet, all of them know this. The meeting is short. Moon's husband does not say much but asks them never to come again. He will continue send Moon money. They all understand, if they claim their former marriage, it will ruin both Moon and her husband. He directly says to Moon: "It's a mistake for you to be here. You can't belong. You don't have the hardness for this country" (Kingston, 1977, p. 153-4). It is why he never sent for her. After the meeting, Moon stays with her daughter in Los Angeles. It is her last choice.

After the meeting, Moon has changed. Before she comes America, she writes to Brave Orchid every month. They have talked about her coming. But for several months of her staying with her daughter, she does not write to Brave Orchid. During this period, she always imagines that “she had overheard Mexican ghosts plotting on her life” (Kingston, 1977, p. 155). In order to escape from the imaginary murder, she even moves out of her daughter’s house and goes to another place she thinks she can escape from Mexican ghosts. Moon’s daughter writes to Brave and tells her the situation of her mother. Brave thinks she has the responsibility to cure her sister. Once again, she recalls the old legend of the emperors.

“Long ago,” she explained to her children, “when the emperors had four wives, the wife who lost in battle was sent to the Northern Palace. Her feet would sink little prints into the snow. (Kingston, 1977, p. 155)

She thinks it shall have her sister with her and rescue her. Soon Moon comes to stay with Brave Orchid. Though Brave believes her power, but the situation of Moon is not good. She keeps describing her nieces’ and nephews’ doings and tries to keep the ghost out of her side. At last “Brave saw that all variety had gone from her sister. She was indeed mad” (Kingston, 1977, p. 159). No one can rescue Moon after the meeting of her husband. She has lost her last hope which supports for so long. At last Moon is sent into a California state mental asylum. After that, Brave Orchid also gets some change in her belief. In the past, she never thinks that her husband will leave her. But from the example of her sister, she is afraid of her husband marrying another woman. She even asks her children to help her. She has no confidence as before.

Brave Orchid is not the Brave at the beginning of the story. Her magic power has gone. But where comes her power? It comes from her belief and imagination. The power is useless in dealing with the reality, just like the meeting with Moon’s husband. It makes a sharp contrast. Through the conflict with the reality, she loses her belief.

Moon’s story is tragic and it shakes the belief of Brave Orchid. There are several causes of the tragedy: spousal abandonment of Moon’s husband, Brave’s violent pushiness, Moon’s old age and culture shock. The use of third-person narration gives clear development of the tragedy. It questions whether Moon should come America to claim her right as the first wife in the price of peaceful life. The third-person narrator tells the story from the place of implied author and gives more objective view about the story. It suggests that the tragedy of Moon and her sister is the cause of the environment. Her husband has to abandon her because she does not fit the society. No one can change it, even Brave Orchid yields at last.

With the above discussion, it is clear that the use of third-person narration gives a clear development of the story and helps the reader to understand what the real cause of the tragedy. It can be understood better. The deviance also helps to understand the cultural difference between Chinese and America.

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