

Hybridity, the Subaltern and Femininity in Kingston's The Woman Warrior

Jelige: Post-colonialism

Abstract

The aim of this paper is to make an inquiry into the realm of post-colonial studies, and to question whether the theory of the subaltern, developed to post-colonial societies, can be applied to describe the position and literary production of communities outside the colonial discourse, for the aim of analyzing Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*. The focus is on immigrant Chinese-American diasporas in the United States, and the question is approached from the language and the gender perspective. In the first part of the paper the key ideas are elaborated on: what hybridity is, and how it influences the identity formation of hybrid female subject; then ensues a description of the theory of the subaltern primarily drawing on Gayatri Spivak's ideas, and, finally, the importance of language in the creation of identity is examined, and the subaltern's role in this process. In the second half of the paper, an attempt is made at applying the theory of the subaltern to Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*. The text is approached from the gender and cultural aspect of hybridity, and from the language aspect of identity formation. Finally, this paper argues that the subaltern can indeed be applied to Chinese-American literary productions, as the analyses of the Chinese tradition of talking-story and its role in Kingston's text supports this statement.

Összefoglalás

Ennek a dolgozatnak a fő célja az, hogy választ találjon a kérdésre, vajon alkalmazható-e a posztkoloniális tanulmányok ún. "subaltern" elmélete, melyet kifejezetten posztkoloniális társadalmakat figyelembe véve alkottak meg, olyan társadalmakra és ezek irodalmára, amelyek a poszt-koloniális kereten kívül állnak, mint például az Egyesült Államokban letelepedett kínai emigránsok csoportja. Az elmélet alkalmazhatóságát Maxine Hong Kingston *The Woman Warrior* c. művén keresztül mutatom be. A kérdést elsősorban a nyelv és a társadalmi nem szempontjából közelítem meg. A dolgozat első felében a főbb fogalmak kerülnek tisztázásra, úgy mint: mi a hibriditás, és milyen szerepet játszik a hibrid női identitás definiálásában; mit foglal magában a subaltern elmélet és hogyan járult hozzá Gayatri Spivak az elmélet kiterjesztéséhez, valamint milyen szerepet játszik a subaltern és a nyelv az identitás formálásában. A dolgozat második felében a subaltern elméletet alkalmazom Kingston *The Woman Warrior* c. művén. A szöveget a hibriditás kulturális és nemi aspektusán keresztül, valamint az identitásformálás nyelvi aspektusán keresztül közelítem meg. Végül bizonyítom Kingston művén keresztül, hogy a subaltern elmélet alkalmazható a posztkoloniális kereten kívül álló társadalmak irodalmára azáltal, hogy elemzem a tradicionális kínai történetmondás, az ún. „talking-story” szerepét a szövegben.

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Introduction

The United States is a nation of immigrants. Ever since the colonial times, America's culture and politics have been shaped by the influx of immigrants. In recent times, with scholars' attention turning more and more towards globalization's effects on local communities, research into the immigrant experience has also increased. Immigrants, upon arriving in the new land, face ambivalence: they hope to take their place among American citizens, yet at the same time they also strive to maintain some elements of the traditions and cultures of their homeland. To reach their goal, immigrants find themselves negotiating between the two worlds; they adapt new cultural forms from their new homes and combine them with old ones, thus creating a third form, a fusion of "partial identities, multiple roles, and pluralistic selves" (Smith 5). This is essentially the birth of a merged, a hybrid identity, and the immigrants occupying this hybrid space experience a sense of "doubleness and cultural intermixture" (Smith 4). Although hybridity has several dimensions, most research focuses on its racial and transcultural dimensions. Gender, however, also affects the immigrant experience, and determines the process of identity construction.

Gayatri Spivak, in her essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?", looks at the situation of oppressed and gendered subjects (Indian women), and how these supposedly oppressed individuals may find expression despite their position in the community. Though her work has been widely criticized because, according to some scholars like Benita Parry, by claiming that "the subaltern cannot speak", Spivak is essentially contributing to the silencing of women and ignoring the fact that they have found their unique ways of speaking by representing themselves as healers or storytellers of a given community (Morton 66). However, even such claims as Parry's have been questioned on the grounds that the representations they draw on are filtered through the dominant discourse Spivak attempted to subvert. Although the theory of the subaltern may fill the need for research into the gender dimension of hybridity, the question still remains whether this theory, which was formulated with colonial communities in mind, can be applied to immigrant diasporas and identities.

Kingston's novel *The Woman Warrior*, a semi-autobiographical nonfictional memoir, "explores ethnicity and gender roles in the context of the experience of a Chinese-American woman" (Lee 106). In other words, it gives an example of a complex hybrid identity; on the one hand, it is a transcultural hybrid identity (Chinese-American), and on the other, it is a female, "gendered" identity. Although the novel has been criticized by Chinese-American author Frank Chin for being misleading, as it does not portray a general, common Chinese

experience, Kingston argued that its intention was exactly to give an individual, subjective experience of how it feels to be a Chinese-American *woman* (Lee 107).

In this paper, I will examine Kingston's interpretation of a Chinese-American feminine experience. In the first part of my paper, I will look at the three dimensions of hybridity (racial, transcultural, and gender), then turn to a general description of Spivak's theory of the subaltern, and finally, I will attempt to answer whether the subaltern, which was essentially created for imperial colonialism and colonial communities, can be applied to a hybrid identity and immigrant communities where, supposedly, there are no oppressors. In the second part of my essay, I will look into Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* for examples on how the individual can negotiate their double identity through the use of language.

1. Hybridity, the Subaltern, and Femininity

As it has been outlined in the introduction, in this first part of the paper I will discuss what hybridity is, and whether the hybrid experience is the same for men and women. Then I will describe the post-colonial idea of the subaltern relying mainly on Spivak's work, and finally, I will examine whether this theory may be used to describe diasporas and immigrant identities.

1.1. What is Hybridity?

According to the *Routledge Post Colonial Studies Key Concepts*, hybridity "commonly refers to the creation of new *transcultural* forms within the contact zone produced by colonization". Hybridization takes many forms: linguistic, cultural, political, racial, etc. "[...] Hybridity has frequently been used in post-colonial discourse to mean simply cross-cultural *exchange*" (Ashcroft 108-11, emphasis in original). In other words, hybridity is a reflexive interaction between cultural forms (local and global), whose outcome is not an assimilated cultural form, but rather elements of the local and the global are combined together to create a third form. This third form is distinct in nature from both the local and the global. Thus, "[t]he hybrid allows for the perpetuation of the local in the context of the global – using the global selectively while continuing essential elements of the local" (Smith 6). Hybridization means crossing and overwriting existing borders, especially political and ethnic ones. During the exchange between cultures, a new space which did not exist prior to the interaction emerges: the third space. It "is a product of the negotiations, interface, and exchange across cultural boundaries" (Smith 8). It is an in-between position. The individual occupying the third space is also in an in-between state, holding position within both cultural forms from which the hybrid was born.

In case of immigrants, a so-called diasporized hybrid emerges from the interaction between the mainstream and the homeland culture. Diaspora, in the common sense, means “the voluntary or forcible movement of peoples from their homelands into new regions” (Ashcroft 68). According to Weiner and Richards, newly arrived immigrants may experience identity formation in three ways: their identity formation may be linear, selective, or reactive. Which process they go through is greatly affected by factors like where the immigrants settle, whether there already is an existing ethnic community, and whether the mainstream society accepts or rejects the newcomers (Smith 108). Linear identity formulation happens mostly with immigrants of European roots. For them, their ethnic identity fades over time, and finally they get fully assimilated into the native-born community. However, the so-called “visible identities” like Asians and Hispanics experience selective identity formulation due to the fact that they are more vulnerable to racial discrimination than other ethnic groups (like those of European origins). Rejection by the majority forces them to selectively adopt certain traits of the mainstream culture while maintaining elements of their home culture, and primarily identifying with the latter. As a result, they create a “hyphenated” identity, such as Asian-American, African-American, etc. These groups will likely never be assimilated completely to the mainstream culture. One of the reasons for this is that they usually occupy a space within their own ethnic diaspora in the new homeland. Thus, they are forced to retain certain elements of their homeland cultures to be able to function within their community. Another reason may be marginalization and discrimination. If marginalized groups face hostility from the majority population, they are only reinforced in their sense of difference from the mainstream, and thus they are more likely to actively differentiate themselves from the majority population, and strengthen their preexisting attachment to their ethnic minority group (Smith 108). This process may last through several generations of immigrant children.

Arriving at a hyphenated identity, that is, negotiating between the norms, beliefs, and behaviors of distinct cultures can be especially difficult if the two cultures are especially different. Furthermore, preexisting racialized images, which we may call “stereotypes”, of an ethnic group may further hinder their attempts. These images often depict ethnic groups as “the other”, the population that can never be assimilated, and which may even be “threatening to the social, economic, and political security” of the majority white population (Smith 246). Thus, identity negotiation may not only involve compromising between different cultural expectations, but even negotiating with racialized images that depict them negatively as “the other” (Smith 246).

1.2. Women and Hybridity

Do women and men experience hybridity in the same way? Do they go through the same identity formation processes and the same experiences associated with it? Although gendered images, just like racialized ones, affect the identity formation of both males and females (for instance, Asian males are often depicted as being feminine, and females as being hyperfeminine), women go through different identity forming experiences and negotiating processes (Smith 246).

Helen Kim, in her essay “Women Occupying the Hybrid Space” looks at how Asian women experience and process their hybrid identities (Smith 246). She finds that for Asian women, the experience of occupying a third space is different from that of Asian man. That is primarily due to the fact that the cultural expectations on what femininity and womanhood is differ in mainstream American and Asian cultures. Thus women very often find themselves having to negotiate between conflicting norms, and vary their gender performances accordingly.

Traditionally, in Asia, women were subjected to their husbands, men possessing power over women in the social context, from the economic to the political, and even in the familial spheres. Women were restricted to the domestic spheres, expected to cater for the needs of the children, the husband, and even the needs of the relatives. Although gender roles have shifted in recent times, women are still supposed to be homemakers, and to assume domestic responsibilities. Upon emigrating from their homeland, however, both sexes’ roles change. Men lose much of their economic and political power over women, whereas simultaneously women’s economic power grows, as their earnings are necessary too to support the family. Parallel to this, women are also less confined to the domestic circles, though they maintain some attachments to it, as it provides a sound background in the face of differing social expectations and partially confirms their parental authority. However, having to leave the domestic circles also subjects women to a less stable social position in a sense, as does immigration, by extracting them from a supporting family system (Smith 249). In traditional China, many generations lived under one roof, and even though women were supposed to take care of the relatives of the husband, they also provided support for the wife; whereas in their new homes, women lose this supportive background which they could rely on.

White women, on the other hand, are seen as being rather masculine compared to the role of the immigrant Asian woman. For instance, they may pursue academic career, and they are not so attached to the domestic sphere, holding more power and personal freedom. Thus, the

image of (upper-class) white women are privileged over marginal ethnic women. Clearly, women are forced to see their identities in terms of dominant and subordinated femininities. Eventually they try to negotiate a hybrid identity that is connected to their ethnic background, yet at the same time does not put them in an inferior position compared to upper-class white women.

The process of identity formation is further complicated by the fact that immigrant women are often characterized by using stereotypes. For instance, Asian women are viewed as being “hyperfeminine”, and “passive, submissive, sexually exotic, and always available for men” (Smith 248). Yet at the same time they may also be “masculinized as scheming, treacherous Dragon Ladies” (Smith 246). Thus, women not only need to construct a hybrid identity that balances and embodies sometimes opposing cultural norms, but they also need to adopt strategies to overcome these stereotypical images so that they would not affect their identities negatively. As a result, Asian immigrant women often find themselves embracing a subordinated femininity which, in their eyes, is less desirable than an upper-class white femininity (Smith 250). But to reject Asian gender norms would mean that they abandon their ethnicity entirely. Thus, Asian-American women need to adopt such strategies to negotiate their identities which allows them to take all these differing aspects into consideration, and which also allows them to overcome negative mainstream images and stereotypes of them.

How can this negotiation take place? Is there a paradigm with which the process can be successfully described? In the following sections, I will describe the theory of the subaltern, and examine whether it can be applied to the identity formation processes of Asian-American women.

1.3. Spivak and the Subaltern

Essentially, the term subaltern was not coined by Spivak per se. However, she proposed several key ideas by which she re-inscribed the term, and made it more flexible to fit all the diverse groups she insisted it encompasses. Let us look into now how the theory of the subaltern came into being, and how Spivak reformulated the idea in the 1980s.

The term was first used by Marxist thinker Antonio Gramsci, and he used it to refer to “the subordinated”, more precisely, to rural South Italian farmers, whom he mainly saw as victims to the ruling political ideologies due to the fact that they were not organized into a coherent group. Gramsci’s notion was later adapted and extended by a group of Indian historians who were referred to as the Subaltern Studies collective, and which included, among several others, Ranajit Guha among its members. The Subaltern Studies historians saw

Gramsci's ideas as especially applicable to the status of oppressed social groups in post-colonial India. They defined the subaltern as "the general attribute of subordination in South Asian society, whether this is expressed in terms of class, caste, age, gender, and office or in any other way" (Morton 48). They argued that traditionally, the histories of the lower-class subordinated classes were recorded by the educated, elite, upper-class social groups of society. Hence these records and historical narratives were necessarily biased, as they reflected the political agenda and ideologies, interests of the recording group, the social (and intellectual) elite. However, the Subaltern Studies historians argued that without the history of the subaltern groups, the mainstream history of India is incomplete; thus they attempted to "write back" the narratives of the subaltern through a critical approach to the dominant, upper-class intellectual representations (Morton 50-1).

However, this "re-inscription" happened primarily through relying on Marxist methodology, and as such, as Spivak argued, the Subaltern Studies scholars were, on the one hand, applying a rigid approach to a much more complex Indian society, and on the other, they are privileging the male subaltern voice and simultaneously excluding women (Morton 48). It is mainly for these two reasons that Spivak criticized the work of the Subaltern Studies group: for applying a narrow definition upon a complex Indian society, and for excluding women's roles and movements from India's history. Furthermore, she also argues that in their attempt at recreating the subaltern voice and consciousness, the historians "bestow[ed] a false coherence on to the much more complex and differentiated struggles of particular subaltern groups" (Morton 53). Effectively, they objectified the subaltern, thus imposing control over it and silencing their voices just as the upper-class intellectuals did. The claim, then, that the subaltern is a "sovereign political subject in control of her destiny" (Morton 53) is yet again a dominant elite construction. Instead, Spivak proposes to take a deconstructionist approach to re-theorizing the notion of the subaltern and to create a post-Marxist definition of it, one which is "flexible" and appropriate for accommodating a wider range of oppressed groups, such as women (Morton 45). She also suggests that as historical discourse tends to privilege male voices, literature and literary texts should be the alternative site for articulating women's histories (Morton 55).

Spivak's argument against the Subaltern Studies historians' work is very similar to her critique of Foucault and Deleuze which she elaborated on in "Can the Subaltern Speak?". She argues that "First World" feminists, in this case French intellectuals, have a tendency to "paradoxically silence the subaltern by claiming to represent and speak for their experience" (Morton 56). The intellectuals act as an "absent nonrepresenter", thereby allowing the

subaltern to tell their experience, whereas, essentially, the dominant intellectual is speaking for the subordinated, thus silencing their voice. Additionally, Spivak also criticizes western feminists for their generalizing claim to “speak for all women, regardless of cultural differences” (Morton 78), and warns against applying western theories and ideologies of representation to Third World women (Morton 58).

In “Can the Subaltern Speak?”, Spivak makes an important counterpoint to western theories of representation through the example of the Hindu practice of sati, or widow-immolation (Morton 64). In Hindu religion, suicide is strictly forbidden, unless committed as part of a pilgrimage or a sacred religious ritual, and it is allowed exclusively for men under normal circumstances (Morton 62). With sati, however, the restriction on the permission of ritual suicide exclusive to men is overwritten in order to include widows. In a sense, sati was not an option for widows, but a social requirement. Women who did not commit suicide after their husband’s death were dishonored, and outcast from society. However, sati was represented as a most sacred privilege to women, by which they could win great honor to their families. It was not a matter of choice, then, but rather a social expectation. Thus, women’s voices were essentially silenced as they were subjected to the expectations of patriarchal Indian society (Morton 62-3). Later, in colonial India, the British authorities represented the practice of widow-immolation as cruel, barbaric and inhumane, thus justifying colonization. By banning sati, they claimed to have liberated women from the barbaric and brutal practices of patriarchal Hindu society. However, in this instance too, women’s voices and subjects are repressed by that of the mainstream, dominant voice of the British colonial authority by being depicted as the passive sufferers of Hindu patriarchal will and violence (Morton 63). In both cases, then, women’s political and social agencies, in other words, their voices, are ignored and subjected to the dominant discourse of either the Hindu male or the British colonizer. It is from this aspect that Spivak made her widely disputed statement, namely that “the subaltern cannot speak” (Morton 64). Although this conclusion has been often criticized, viewed from Spivak’s approach it certainly has validity in that women’s voices and agency are so embedded into both Hindu social codes and colonial British representations that they may be impossible to entangle and recover (Morton 63-4).

Spivak’s radical statement that “the subaltern cannot speak” has been the subject of criticism by several scholars, such as Benita Parry and Bart Moore-Gilbert (Morton 66). In their point of view, Spivak, with her poststructuralist approach, has only complicated the situation of subaltern women, and has even contributed to their silencing through ignoring the ways in which oppressed women did find a way to express themselves. These forms of

expression include becoming healers of a community or storytellers, both of which mean relatively powerful positions within a community, and from where women can make their voices be heard (Ingram 87). Furthermore, Spivak's critics also argue that after the re-inscription and extension of the meaning of the term, subaltern now encompasses too many different disempowered groups and positions. The term's scope is so wide that it includes all social groups except for the dominant elite, even upper-middle-class women, who clearly cannot be described by the same terms as poor peasants, for instance (Morton 61). Lastly, it has also been argued by Moore-Gilbert that historical examples do exist where the dominant historical discourse recorded the struggles of women, such as Phoolan Devi, the bandit queen (Morton 66). However, Spivak's main point is not that subaltern groups cannot be represented at all, but that even if they make an attempt at speaking, their voices cannot be heard because the recordings of these utterances are already filtered through the dominant historical discourse. Thus, the subaltern receives its identity "within historically determined systems of political and economic representation" (Morton 67). Spivak's point is exactly to identify and expose the problems such speaking for subordinated groups may raise.

1.4. The Subaltern Outside the Colonial Discourse and the Question of Language

As I have pointed out in the introduction, my main concern with the subaltern is whether it can be taken out of the colonial/post-colonial context and applied to the experience of immigrant communities in the United States. Naturally, this also raises the question whether there are any similarities between post-colonial and immigrant communities, and if not, can the differences be negotiated or neutralized to the level that the same theoretical framework (in this case, hybridity and the subaltern) could be used to describe them? In this section, I will compare post-colonial societies with immigrant diasporas, and explore the possibilities of applying the subaltern discourse to Asian-American communities in the USA through looking at how language and literature functions in these communities.

Although it may be argued that Spivak developed her theory with the society structure in postcolonial India in mind, however, the subaltern itself encompasses many more diverse regions and cultural groups such as the West Indies or Black writing in Africa (Ashcroft 19). Hence the subaltern must necessarily contain such general theoretical implications which cross cultural and regional differences. This, of course, is not to say that the theory itself inherently possesses such an attribute, but rather, it is the other way around: there are pre-existing features within post-colonial communities that the subaltern draws attention to. The site of articulation for these features is literature, since, as Spivak pointed out, literature is not

restricted by the colonial or dominant discourse (Morton 55). One such shared feature in post-colonial literature is “the concern with place and displacement” (Ashcroft 8). A change in the relationship to one’s place (for instance, due to migration, or the invasive oppression and domination of a supposedly superior culture) necessarily undermines the established image of self, and calls into question its validity (Ashcroft 9). This identity crisis arises from the fact that the individual, who is removed, “displaced” from their original frame of living (either by moving to a new homeland, or the invasion of a dominating, authoritative community), has to realize that the language available to them is not appropriate to describe their new or different framework of living. This is true both in the case of a mother tongue which has been unprivileged by a culturally more valued language, or in the case of a new, either forcefully or willingly adopted language, like English (Ashcroft 9-10). Naturally, the inadequacy of language also results in the questioning of the functions and validity of literature (Ashcroft 16). To overcome the crisis the individual has to redefine not only themselves but literature too, which is realized by the creation of a unique usage of the language of power (such as English), which is adequate to express the individual’s experience (Ashcroft 24). This involves two processes: first, the abrogation of language, and second, its appropriation (Ashcroft 38). Abrogation means the rejection of the privilege of the language of power, the language of the dominating social group. However, the subversion of the dominant language also means the subversion of the dominant social group, and thereby it is removed from the center which it originally inhabited. Appropriation, on the other hand, means the actual “remolding” of the language into a new, unique form, through which it becomes suitable for expressing the subject’s new experience. Thus these two processes, abrogation and appropriation, not only help the individual in embracing their new frame of living by creating a unique means of expression, but they also signal a breaking away from colonial culture through the re-establishment of literature and through the subversion of the dominant discourse (Ashcroft 38-9).

Even though it was not formulated strictly within the post-colonial discourse, Max Dorsinville’s model of the “dominated-dominator societies” can be used to extend the above described idea of the relationship between language and displacement (Ashcroft 32). According to Dorsinville’s model, literatures should be viewed in relationship to each other; in other words, they should be viewed in a larger hierarchical frame. In this sense, even dominating literatures can be viewed as dominated ones if they are overshadowed by another, more privileged literature. For instance, US literature before the 18th century can be viewed as dominated by British literature, and as such, it could be viewed as colonial production as well

(Ashcroft 16). Furthermore, this model can be used to describe the productions of minority literatures in a given country, including the productions of immigrant communities as well (Ashcroft 32).

From the models above, it becomes clear that immigrant diasporas do show similarities with post-colonial communities. On the one hand, in minority literary or cultural productions the feeling of displacement is a reoccurring theme, as is the inadequacy of their mother tongue or their newly adopted language to express their immigrant experience. On the other hand, immigrant literary works are often written in a language that is essentially the mixture of the dominant language and the mother tongue, showing the processes of abrogation and appropriation at work. Furthermore, immigrant groups were also the subjects of stereotypes, or, as in the case of the subaltern, their experience was formulated within a politically biased dominant discourse. As for the case of women, in immigrant communities which derive from traditionally patriarchal societies, such as Korean or Chinese diasporas, women may show similar patterns as do subaltern subjects, i.e. they are doubly oppressed and silenced (first, by their husbands, and second, by the mainstream society and culture). Therefore it is possible to attempt to apply the subaltern theory outside the colonial discourse, more specifically, to immigrant communities.

In the next part of my paper, I will examine and describe Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* through the "extended" view of the theory of the subaltern. I will first look at how racial and gender hybridity is problematized, and then I will turn to how the tension between minority femininity and masculinity, and Asian and mainstream American cultures are solved through language, by the creation of a unique voice.

2. The Woman Warrior and the Subaltern: Identity, Gender, and Language in Crisis

The Woman Warrior gives the account of the struggle of a Chinese-American girl/woman to carve her identity out of the seemingly opposing ideas of her Chinese heritage and mainstream American culture. The struggle takes place on different levels, posing various questions which deconstruct the validity of identity, gender, and language. Among the questions asked are such as "How can a Chinese-American girl establish her female self when the codes and expectations of Chinese and American femininity differ from each other?" If the establishment is achieved, how can the self image survive when, in the eyes of the Chinese immigrants, an American-born Chinese is just a "Ho Chi Kuei", a ghost, just like the

rest of the Americans; and in the eyes of the Americans, they are “chinks”, the inassimilable elements of society (Begum 146). How can identity performance be negotiated, when in the morning at American school one is supposed to act American, whereas in afternoon school, one is supposed to act Chinese? And, finally, how can one form valid utterances if they only possess “chink words” and “gook words” (Schueller 429)? In the following parts, I will first look at the gender-, cultural hybridity aspect of *The Woman Warrior*, and afterwards I will examine the language aspect: how identity is negotiated through the abrogation and appropriation of English by using the Chinese oral tradition of “talking-story”, that is, storytelling to rewrite Chinese myths and interweave them with American texts to make both function within the hybrid context.

Before continuing with the text, however, it is important to say a few words about the novel’s structure, which also provides the framework for the following analysis. The novel’s structure is unique in that it interweaves traditional Chinese songs, myths and legends with the author’s memoir to the point that they become inseparable. Myths and the tradition of oral storytelling, or “talking-story”, play a crucial part in the narrative, and thus the ability to speak bears special importance. The possession of language or lack thereof means the ability or disability to formulate one’s identity. The interwoven, rewritten Chinese texts exemplify the steps in the mastering of the language and finding a voice. Naturally, then, the sections will be based on the interpretations of these traditional stories.

2.1. Gender- and Cultural Hybridity in *The Woman Warrior*

Having been born to immigrant Chinese parents for whom home meant China and the US was an exile, and who kept up the village hierarchy even in their new land, Kingston felt the influence of patriarchal China growing up (Schueller 431). Location to a new homeland did not mean that the immigrants were ready to embrace new social codes and expectations. As such, attitudes towards women did not change, either, even if their status did change by contributing to the family income. As it has been mentioned in a previous section, femininity in traditional China was undervalued compared to masculinity. In a sense it is understandable, since having a daughter primarily meant expenses for the family in the long run. When girls were married off, they took their dowry with them and moved in with their husbands’ family, increasing their wealth. It is no wonder then that such proverbs came into being as “there’s no profit in raising girls; better to raise geese than girls”, and, “feeding girls is like feeding cowbirds” (Kingston 46). These attitudes are reflected in the narrator’s accounts in *The Woman Warrior*. Her parents, for instance, having more than one daughter, were often

shamed by their fellow villagers, who settled in the same area as they, when they took their girls out together: the villagers shook their heads in pity that the family was so burdened by daughters. We also learn that the girls' uncle did not even count them as humans; whenever he asked whether the children wanted to go out with him, he only counted the boys, and outright ignored the girls' requests to take them too. For him, only the boys counted as sensible human beings (Kingston 47). At another instance, the narrator assures us that the situation was similar in other immigrant families, too. Upon visiting some friends, where the family had, all told, six daughters, she was witness to similar treatment of women: the grandfather constantly referred to the girls as "maggots", and when they sat down to eat, he pointed to each and every one of them, shouting: "Eat, maggots!" (Kingston 191). The narrator also learns from the mother, who was a midwife in China, that families often had a box full of ashes near the birthing bed, so that it would be at hand in case the newborn was a girl, and the parents wanted to get rid of it quickly (Schueller 436).

The reaction of the narrator to this treatment was to deny her femininity: whenever she heard a misogynist proverb, she threw a tantrum; when she was asked what she wanted to be when she grew up, her answer was lumberjack in Oregon. When she was scorned for being bad, she asked whether a bad girl was not like a boy already. However, parents in China solve the problem of tantrum-throwing, useless daughters simply: they sell them to be slaves. And that is yet another thing the girls learned early on: if they grew up to be slaves, the servants of their husbands, they failed. The narrator's mother did not tell her stories of women heroes by accident: they were supposed to serve as examples to her (Schueller 426-7). However, these stories, specifically, the story of the swordswoman Fa Mu Lan, while celebrating the successes of powerful women, also strengthen the patriarchal values, male dominance over women, and filial expectations towards women (Schueller 427, Li 509). Even as Fa Mu Lan is depicted as a woman who is to be admired for becoming more than an "average slave", she takes her senile father's place during the conscription to avenge the wrongs her family had to suffer. And, when her task is finished, she was expected to return home, settle, be an obedient wife and bear children for her husband. But, what the narrator as a girl learns from the story is that she is supposed to become more than the average; hence she tries to excel at school. She receives good grades, however, these are not enough to impress the Chinese community: "you can't eat straight A's" (Kingston 46). In their eyes, she too, along with the other immigrant children born in the US and all the Americans around them, is a *Ho Chi Kuei*, which is a derogatory and incomprehensible term for the narrator, meaning ghost, more or less. The Chinese immigrant's world is filled with ghosts, like the Taxi Ghost, the Garbage Man Ghost,

Mexican Ghosts, and so on and so forth (Li 513). By labeling their children with the same term that they use to describe the white Americans around them, they are marking them as different, simultaneously distancing their children from their own culture. Naturally, then, the narrator is perplexed at what norms she should adopt in everyday life: should she walk pigeon-toed, which is Chinese feminine, or American-feminine, toes looking forward (Kingston 11)? Should she talk like a Chinese, shouting all the time, as if they were angry (Kingston 12)? However, the narrator has to realize that this is not an either-or question; adopting one way of cultural norms does not allow her to function properly in the other one. Denying her female self does no good either. Thus she has to turn to other examples to look for an answer.

There is another story that the girl narrator is told by her mother: the story of the No Name Woman, her aunt. Her story is a taboo in the family, and she is treated as if she had never been born because she broke the rules of the community back in China when she committed adultery (although it never turns out whether this was actually a rape or a conscious act) and became pregnant. The community took revenge on the aunt by raiding the family's house where she lived, and the family took their revenge on her by disowning her, and leaving her name for oblivion. On the one hand, the aunt is the victim of patriarchal society: what had happened to her was a subversion of the codes of society, and the punishment for that is outlawing, removing her from the frameworks of the community. On the other hand, however, the aunt is also a victorious rebel by the means of what she did: committing a double suicide by jumping into the family well with her baby. This was not a punishment forced on her by the community; she acted out of her own will (Begum 150-1). And by jumping into the well she not only polluted the family's drinking water, but also created a constant source of fear for them, since the Chinese are extremely afraid of the mythical figure of the drowned dead (Begum 151). In this sense, the aunt stepped out of her oppressed status and let her voice be heard by sacrificing herself and her newborn. Of course the narrator cannot recreate the act of the aunt, and does not mean to either. However, it serves as an example on how one can rebel against the dominant male discourse, although at the expense of their life.

Yet another example the narrator is actually witness to is what happens to the mother's sister, Moon Orchid. Moon Orchid arrives in America in search of her long gone husband, upon prompting by her sister. Brave Orchid literally forces her sister to hunt down her husband who had left her in China ages ago to come to America and start a new life, a new family with a young, Americanized Chinese woman. She cites examples from Chinese stories, where first wives successfully demanded their rightful place beside their husband after they

took other wives. Moon Orchid, however, is again the victim of patriarchy. She is incapable of demanding anything from her husband. The US, too, perplexes her. Upon arriving, she declares, when seeing some Chinese people who did not belong to their Chinese village, that she did not expect the Americans to look and talk so very much like the Chinese. To her eyes, even the Chinese immigrants that had different roots looked like completely different people (Schueller 435). All this is too much for her, and she gets lost in the New World without the old framework of defining oneself provided by the Chinese context. Neither her daughter, nor her own sister can help her: she ends up in an insane asylum after losing her sanity (Li 505). Moon Orchid's fate exemplifies the dangers that lie in the inability to adopt a functioning definition of identity in a new context. Clinging rigidly to an image of self that is non-functional in a new setting leads to the dissolution of the identity, which, in Moon Orchid's case, equals the loss of sanity (Frye 294).

Through these examples, the narrator could realize not only that women like herself are in a doubly oppressed position (first, they are oppressed by Chinese patriarchy, and second, by American mainstream culture), but also that coming to terms with her identity is imperative if she is to overcome her marginal position, and to function in the American-Chinese context. However, nor denial of the self (femininity), nor adopting the cultural-social expectations of one community (Chinese or American) would allow her to do so, thus she has to turn to other strategies. In the following part I will discuss how language plays a crucial part in the articulation of the self, and how Kingston's narrator realizes this.

2.2. Language and the Self: Language as Establishing Agent

Language plays an important part for those who write from a marginal position, and as such, it is important for women writers, too. Language and the act of articulation serve as a means of breaking down and crossing barriers that suppress those occupying the marginal space (Schueller 423). By validating their voice, the individual also validates their experience and identity.

The narrator in *The Woman Warrior* is instinctively aware of the role language plays in overcoming the limitations a marginal subject experiences. On the one hand, she faces the same dilemma as a girl that many women writers before her, just as Virginia Woolf, did: the problem of the "phallic" English "I", and the disparity between it and the Chinese "I" (Li 506-7). The narrator says that she was perplexed by the English "I" at school: she could not understand how it could only stand of three strokes, and yet be so sure, so assertive; she waited for it to transform into the more familiar Chinese "I" with its many strokes forming

mountains. Her bedazzlement could be contributed to the fact that, even though the English language has no gender-specific pronouns, the capital “I” denotes a self-assuredness that is associated with male individuality. Furthermore, the English phallogentric “I” also carries in it the assumption that the individual is more important than the community; note that “you”, for instance, is lower case. However, in Chinese, gender-specific pronouns carry different connotations. Chinese culture emphasizes that subjects acquire their worth through the community, and thus the community is more important than the individual; hence the custom that the person, as the narrator asserts, is required to write their own names crooked and in small letters (Li 507). Another reason the narrator is baffled is because there is in Chinese a personal pronoun standing for the female “I” which means slave (Li 508). Herein lies the paradox: the narrator is doubly bound, since she cannot possess the dominant male assuredness of the English “I”, but if she chooses to speak in Chinese, she reduces herself to the state of the slave. She is bound up in the shackles of language. It is no wonder then, as later we also learn, that as a young girl the narrator had hardships when she had to speak at school.

At American school, she was struck by a dumbness she could not overcome. However, she realizes that this was the case not only with her, but with her sister, and with other Chinese girls too. Then, she comes to the conclusion, this silence must be connected to being Chinese (Schueller 425). Indeed, in Chinese culture, women are not supposed to voice their ideas; they are considered to be bad wives or daughters if they disagree with what men say. However, at Chinese school, she mysteriously finds a voice, but this is a strange, alien one: there are “splinters” in it, sounding as if bones were rubbed together (Schueller 425). Then one afternoon, the narrator literally tortures another Chinese girl whom she especially detested for her silence, and for what she sees as being soft and disgusting. She tried to make the girl speak by every means imaginable to her: she threatened the girl, shouted at her, scorned her, pleaded with her, and pinched her cheeks and so on and so forth, but to no avail. The girl would not speak, even if she was promised to be left alone if she said but one word. In reality, the reason for the narrator’s hatred is that this other girl stands for what is typically associated with Chinese femininity: being silent, soft, and never resistant. Through the silent girl she crucified all that she hated in herself. She tells the girl she has to talk in order to let the world know that she has a brain and a personality, that she is not just a dummy (Begum 148-9). But after her failure to make the girl talk, and to help her prove she has a personality, she sees her own limitations, and faces her fears of not having a personality herself. After the incident she becomes physically ill, and is bedridden for more than a year. When she goes back to school,

to society, she has to figure out how to speak again (Begum 150). In a sense this incident is a rite of passage, a step towards establishing her own voice: by torturing the quiet girl, she identifies all those same traits she hates in herself and connects to Chinese femininity. During her illness, she has the chance to ponder on how to negotiate these and weave them into a functioning identity.

At another instance, the narrator decides to make a list of all the bad things she had done in her life, and confess them to her mother. She comes up with a list of over 200 items, and she decides to tell one item to her mother every evening. However, on the second evening, her mother scolds her for telling her all this nonsense, and sends her away. The narrator obeys, but “she feels something clawing at her throat”. She has to hold back all that she feels she has to give out of herself (Hunt 10). However, one night, at a family dinner, her “throat burst open”, and she started listing all her grievances. It is important that by this time her sins became grievances, and she poured them all onto her parents (Hunt 11). What she rebels against is what she believes to be the family’s intention to marry her off, to turn her into a slave. So effectively, she is rebelling against the traditions of Chinese patriarchy, threatening to run away. It is, however, again an important step towards finding her voice that she can break down the barrier inside of her (the throat bursting open) and give voice to what she does not agree with (Hunt 12).

Interestingly, the act of establishing the self through language is an integral part of Chinese culture. We learn from the narrator that whenever she and her sister were scared, the mother would chant their names into their ears and their location, so that their scared spirits would find their ways back. The same purpose is served when the mother, after exorcising a ghost at the medical university in China, asks her fellow students to chant her name, so that she can return back. And finally, when Brave Orchid sees that her sister, Moon Orchid is on the verge of losing her sanity, she tries to bring it back by chanting. However, chanting serves another purpose, too: parents often sang Chinese legends in this way to educate their children, as it has already been mentioned in a previous section. The narrator recalls following around her mother when she was a young child, the two singing together the story of Fa Mu Lan. Chanting, then, is also a means of helping the young establish a preferable identity by offering them role models from myths and legends (Li 499). However, these stories, as an instrument of education, are necessarily filtered through the dominant discourse. Thus, if the narrator is to use them in the process of establishing her identity, she has to re-inscribe them in a way that they can authentically mirror her doubly subaltern position. In the final section of my

paper I will look at how this re-inscription takes place, and how this helps the protagonist to negotiate her Chinese-American hybrid identity.

2.3. Talking-story, or the Appropriation of English Through Chinese Legends

Talking-story is an integral part of Chinese culture. Interestingly, English has no word or phrase which corresponds with the meaning of the actual Chinese expression itself, hence it was transcribed as “talking-story”. It is not the same as talking, or telling a story; it is rather an infusion of the two: this expression implies that the speaker is weaving story-like elements into their speech that might even require the listener to suspend their disbelief as they have more to do with fantasy than reality. As an integral part of Chinese culture, the act of talking-story proves to be an appropriate means of expressing the subaltern’s experience. However, as the subaltern, in our case, an American-born Chinese, speaks from a special position, talking-story must be appropriated to fit the needs of the speaker and to make it capable of reflecting the speaker’s hybrid position. In this last section I will look at how Kingston uses the tradition of talking-story in *The Woman Warrior*, and how she abrogates and appropriates English through it to establish a hybrid identity.

Talking-story gives the backbone of Kingston’s novel. Not only is it composed of several stories weaved together from the narrator’s childhood, adulthood, and Chinese legends, but the whole book itself, deriving from its autobiographical nature, is like a long, ever ongoing talking-story. Interestingly, the legends and myths woven into the story are not in their original form. They are rewritten, often retold in the first person singular, as if the narrator herself was the protagonist of these traditional stories. The retelling of these stories serves as a means of removing the text from the dominant, patriarchal discourse and to appropriate it for the needs of the subaltern’s ways of expression. However, these traditional texts may be so entangled in the discourse that rewriting them to be a completely functioning subaltern text may not be possible. Such is the case, for instance, with the legend of Fa Mu Lan.

We learn from the narrator, as previously mentioned, that the legend of Fa Mu Lan formed an important part of her childhood, as it was sang to her as a story to grow up on, the protagonist set to her as an example to follow, a kind of role model, practically. As such, it is especially important that this is one of the stories the narrator attempts to establish as a channel for expressing her subaltern experience. The account of her life flows inconspicuously into the account of Fa Mu Lan’s story, told in the first person. It is as if the narrator herself embodied Fa Mu Lan. She tells the story of how she was trained to be a warrior, training hard every day, all the while watching her enemies, the wrongdoers of her

village she would have to kill through a water gourd. These enemies are misogynist barons who “sat on naked little girls” and “count[ed] their money” (Kingston 30), and who, later in the story, are identified in the “actual life” of the narrator with the bosses and the businessmen she has to win against to be someone (Li 512). During her training, the parents marry her off to a childhood friend by proxy, and she accepts, and is even honored by this decision. At the end of her training and trials, she returns home to avenge the wrongs her family and her village had to suffer at the hands of the barons, and to take her elderly father’s place at conscription. Fa Mu Lan’s character is especially ambiguous here, as she is welcomed home as a son: the mother cooks her soup which they traditionally offer to homecoming sons. And later, when they see her off to war, she looks so much like a young male warrior, but the villagers exclaim, “How beautiful she is!” (Schueller 428). Furthermore, the villagers bring her oranges and presents as if she was a bride and they celebrated her wedding. But she is dressed like a man, and her hair is cut and knotted back like a man’s. Her character is made even more ambiguous when in combat, she rescues her husband, and after spending the nights together secretly, she becomes pregnant. To disguise her belly and to hide her child after its birth, she loosens her armor, and during this time, she looks especially like a very powerful man. When she arrives at the baron she has to kill, she announces herself as a female avenger. The baron misunderstands her, and he tries to appeal to her by telling her the proverbs she hated, like it is better to raise geese than girls, and so on (Schueller 428-9). Before slaying the baron, she, upon his astonishment, reveals to him her true sex. She then releases the wretched and crippled women who were kept in the baron’s cells. In the end, she returns home to settle down, and to be a wife beside her husband and to bear more children for him.

Even though the narrator tried to re-inscribe the text, it still visibly recreates the dominant patriarchal discourse she tried to rid it of. This is exemplified by the fact that, even though the swordswoman is depicted as an outstanding exemplary figure who proves that women can be more than just slaves, she is still expected to settle and serve the needs of her family. Thus this text, while on the surface it celebrates the success of a rebellious woman, through its ending it also reinforces the codes and expectations of society. However, this does not necessarily mean that this is a non-functioning text; it does work for the narrator’s mother whose life story is very similar to that of Fa Mu Lan’s.

The mother, Brave Orchid, lived for quite a while like an independent single woman in China owing to the fact that her husband had left for America, but he kept sending her money. She even decided to enroll in medical university, and get a degree in midwifery. There she kept her true age a secret, and acted like she was a contemporary of the girls there, when in

reality, she was 10-15 years their senior. She bested her peers by learning hard at night. It was at the university that she exorcised a ghost from a haunted dormitory room at night. Later, when she worked as a village physician and midwife, she also met a ghost at a rope bridge. She also overcame her fear from bandits and wild animals while walking from one village to another at night. In this sense, she too, was like the woman warrior: she was independent, brave, almost like a man: she even overcame a ghost on her own and won the fight, because she knew who she was, and that she was stronger than the ghost. The narrator affirms that she knew her mother was a warrior, because she ate all sorts of strange things; and warriors have a good appetite (Kingston 88-90). However, in the end Brave Orchid traveled to America to join her husband where she helped him to establish a laundry, make a living, and she bore children for him. Brave Orchid's life parallels the story of Fa Mu Lan: even though she had the chance to step out of the patriarchal discourse, she eventually reinforced it when she joined her husband. However, this is not the aim of the narrator; if she is to mold the traditional Chinese framework and the mainstream American one into a functioning hybrid/subaltern discourse, she has to look for other options, other stories within the talking-story custom of the Chinese.

In the last chapter of the book, "A Song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe", the narrator says that she will tell a story that her mother told her when she confessed she also talked-story. According to her, the beginning of the story is her mother's, and the end is hers. This signals an important step in the establishment of her subaltern voice: the ability to take a text, the story her mother started, and finish it in her own voice, with her own words. This process is also reflected in the story the narrator tells: it is the legend of the Chinese poetess, Ts'ai Yen. Ts'ai Yen was the daughter of a Chinese sovereign, who was captured by a barbaric horde, and married by the leader of the barbarians. She followed them on their campaigns, riding on horseback. She had children from the leader too, but for her sadness, she was not allowed to teach them to speak her language. However, whenever she was alone with them, she tried to talk to them in Chinese, but the children only answered in "senseless singsong words and laughed" (Kingston 208). Ts'ai Yen, then, embodies the alien within a community: not only is she displaced from her people, but even her own children do not understand her words (Schueller 429). One night, however, the barbarians built a campfire and started playing their instruments by its side. Ts'ai Yen heard the familiar music, and started singing in her tent, her voice so high and clear like "an icicle in the desert" (Kingston 208). The barbarians heard it and gathered around her. Even though they could not understand the words, they could understand the sadness and anger in it. This, in a sense, was the way Ts'ai Yen broke through

to her captors: despite their unshared language, she could have her voice heard finally when the barbarians understood her sorrow. The poetess' situation is similar to that of the narrator's in that they are both in a subaltern position, striving to legitimize their utterances, to establish their voice, in other words, to create an identity and a language that is appropriate for their present, dislocated contexts.

But it is not only through Ts'ai Yen's story that the narrator proves she has established her voice: *The Woman Warrior* itself is proof for it. Even though the novel is written in English, there are many literal translations from Chinese, or variations, explanations on how the Chinese express some notions differently from English. Also, there are, allegedly, puns that are only intended for and understood by Chinese readers (Lee 112). The first chapter, and essentially, the book itself, starts with a forbiddance: the mother tells her daughter the story of the No Name aunt only to serve a purpose, to reinforce moral expectations; the daughter is never to speak about the aunt under any circumstances. However, the narrator overcomes this cultural forbiddance by "devoting pages" to her dead relative, and she is not breaking her promise to her mother either, since she is not talking about the aunt, but *writing* her story (Lee 109). This act of subversion on the narrator's behalf allows her to undermine the Chinese habit of building a wall of silence and to legitimize her voice in the face of it. In the end, the above mentioned narrative strategies signal that the processes of abrogation and appropriation have taken place; that is, the authority and centrality of English was deconstructed, and then the language was adapted so that it would be capable to express the narrator's hybrid and subaltern experience.

Conclusion

In the Introduction of this paper I asked whether the subaltern, formulated for post-colonial discourse, can be used to describe communities outside of the post-colonial framework. In conclusion, I claim that the subaltern can be applied to communities outside the colonial framework, although such application may call for the expansion of the notion first. Throughout several sections I explored the possibilities, and finally, I attempted to apply my conclusions to describe how Kingston in her book *The Woman Warrior* depicts the creation of a hybrid Chinese-American identity and the validation of a subaltern voice.

Although immigrant Chinese communities definitely cannot be put under the same category as, for instance, post-colonial Indian society for which the subaltern was originally formulated, the main advantage of the category of the subaltern is its flexibility and ability to describe diverse groups in different contexts (hence it can account for the experience of

peasant men as well as middle-class women, both belonging to the subaltern group). Based on this flexibility of the subaltern's applicability, I extended it using Dorsinville's model which suggests that literatures can be viewed in relation to each other, that is, they can be viewed in terms of "dominated-dominator" literatures. In this sense, mainstream American literature is the dominator, and any production by the minority or subaltern communities are the dominated literatures. Furthermore, I also argued that Chinese-American women, just like Indian women, are in a doubly oppressed position since, on the one hand, they are oppressed by their husbands and the patriarchal moral codes of Chinese society, and on the other hand by mainstream American culture which views them as unalterable and inassimilable "chinks". Thus, if a Chinese-American immigrant woman is to produce any kind of literature to validate their voices and identities, they will have to utilize the same methods as their Indian counterparts.

Language plays a crucial part in the validation of identity. Therefore literary production would prove to be an adequate site for the negotiation of self and the validation of voice. However, with a change in their circumstances, subaltern groups find that the language they are equipped with is no longer appropriate for expressing their different contexts. First, the language of the dominant culture must be removed from the privileged central position to restore value to the suppressed subaltern language, in other words, the process of abrogation must take place. Then, the language of the subaltern must be appropriated to be adequate for expressing the new context of living of the community.

In *The Woman Warrior*, I examined what part language plays in the negotiation of a hybrid Chinese-American identity, and how this negotiation is taking place through language, more precisely, through the re-inscription of traditional Chinese texts. The re-inscription of these traditional texts and integration into the author's contemporary text not only allows her to remove them from the patriarchal discourse which the texts originally served to reinforce, but also to establish a valid subaltern voice and to come to terms with her double, Chinese-American heritage. The use of Chinese words and literal translations of these are signs that English has been appropriated for the special needs of the author to express her hybrid experience.

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