Between Patriarchy and Madness: Forging Female Visibility in Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior: Memories of Girlhood among Ghosts (1976)*

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Abstract

Throughout history, the pervasive representations of female "madness" in literature have always conveyed the impression that females are fragile creatures that require control. Such accusations are manipulated in a way to silence and marginalize them. As a reaction to this distorted image, some contemporary female writers utilize this concept as a strategy to defy the male-defined roles. Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior: Memories of Girlhood among Ghosts* (1976) is the best example to illustrate this issue. Through the lenses of psychoanalytical feminism, this article seeks to explore the various portrayals of madness in the aforementioned novel and how it is used as an instrument of resistance against cultural and social norms. The study will also come to the conclusion that madness is not a female malady; rather, it is an abnormal behavior that might affect both genders and requires clinical intervention.

Keywords: madness; woman ; resistance ; patriarchy ; female malady

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INTRODUCTION

Madness in literature has always been a captivating theme amongst many authors for many decades. The various endeavors to read the human mind, delve deep into its psyche to investigate the irrational is indeed a fascinating subject for many writers to tackle. Tatiana Solovieva notices in her article that, as a concept, madness has been an exotic notion which was largely uncompetitive for a long period "demonstrate that the binary opposition, which is thoroughly established, between sanity and madness is smoothly eroding. Owing to the vehemence of madness and the nature of its composition, the short story format seems a compelling element to be analyzed. In addition, this concept became an intriguing subject to be experimented and treated in society as well as in Literature by the end of the nineteenth century[1].

The concept of madness is hard to be defined or described because it is connected to various disciplines. In addition, it is a subject of alteration according to the recentness of research in mental health. In her book entitled: *Madness in literature* Lilian Feder shares this view as well, she believes that:

> *"The treatment of madness in literature reflects human ambivalence toward the mind itself; madness, comprising its strangest manifestations, is also familiar, a fascinating and repellent exposure of the structures of dream and fantasy, of irrational fears and bizarre desires ordinarily hidden from the world and the conscious self. In literature, as in daily life, madness is the perpetual amorphous threat within and the extreme of the unknown in fellow human beings."*[2]

Indeed the studies of the unconscious, sanity/insanity are challenging in the sense that it is no easy task to understand the individual in a separation/detachment from his/her entourage, values, interactions and cultural norms. In addition, "gender" plays a significant role in this case. Hence, the concept of madness is reformulated and represented in different manners according to one's view and intention. As a matter of fact, the feminist critic Phyllis Chesler (1979) writes: "What we consider 'madness,' whether it appears in women or in men, is either the acting out of the devalued female role or the total or partial rejection of one's sex role stereotype."[3]. Obviously, there is an association between madness and femininity. Such prejudices are best illustrated in many narratives; that is to say, literature might be regarded as the best documentation of this relationship; from Shakespeare's *Hamlet* to Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre* to Arthur Miller's The *Crucible.*

In many respects, some literary works imply that women are weak, fragile, irrational and dangerous creatures that require to be controlled; they utilize the charge of madness as a way to silence and marginalize them. Therefore, women must fully exhibit a total obedience and subjugation. As a reaction to this distorted image, some contemporary female writers use "madness" as a strategy to challenge the real "mad" social and cultural norms of patriarchy that characterize men with reason, logic, and rationality whilst accusing women of irrationality, impulsiveness, and recklessness. Maxine Hong Kingston is one of the best authors who applied this technique in her entitled: ***The Woman Warrior: Memories of Girlhood among Ghosts*** **(1976)**.Through the lenses of the Feminist Approach, the purpose of this

paper is to study "madness" as a metaphor to challenge the stereotypes that the patriarchal society project on women.

I. FEMALE MADNESS: A QUESTION OF GENDER AND RACE

A considerable intellectual debt must be owed to Michael Foucault for being one of the pioneers who wrote about madness. In his book *Madness and Civilization*, Foucault spoke about the constitution of the insane asylum and what used to exist before that. He asserted that during the 17th century, these institutions were labeled as "the Great Confinement"[4]. In 1965, the first house of these confinements was called "l' hôpital général" in Paris. This institution was established to house the jobless and the poor who were used as a cheap labor as means to promote the welfare of the nation. But before Paris, forty years ago, the houses of confinement were established in England and were intentionally fixed around the most industrialized zones in the country like, Worcester, Norwich and Bristol[5] state for the same mission. Foucault noted that these houses failed to fulfill their mission. As a result, they were replaced by "insane asylums". Obviously, it was the first time that madmen started to be confined and categorized according to their mental state; yet, they were chained to walls and beds, put in cages, displayed publically and treated like animals[6].Women on their part, were not treated any better; even worse; violent women were also chained by their ankles to the walls[7]. In a description made by Foucault, the asylums were designed like animal cages, a "menagerie"[8], locking them away to prevent scandal rather than treating their mental status and this was regarded as the most human act they could do for them. However, his study is criticized by some female critics such as Elaine Showalter "because it fails to take account of sexual difference and explore the possibility that their rationality and difference, which the asylum silences and confines, also represents the feminine"[9]. These critics figure out that delving deeper into the history of "female" madness is so crucial for the debunking all the sorts of the representations towards women and their mental health to expose the reality.

In the past decade, women were punished when they decided to rebel against the social codes imposed on them by the patriarchal society they live in. A female who did not conform to the social rules of the community is charged with the crime of being "mad" or "insane". Perhaps this is where Michael Foucault can be criticized because when he speaks about the power of discourse in his book *Crime and Punishment*, he did not take into consideration the fact that women are oppressed in terms of race and gender; he just pinpointed the idea that the power of the institutional discourse that distinguishes men from women in terms of class.

Among the feminists who draw attention to female madness through their bodywork are Elaine Showalter, Lilian Feder, Jane M. Ussher, and Phyllis Chesler, all of whom have written on female madness and how it is illustrated in Literature. We all agree that this mental disorder has various reasons and requires treatment but what has been noticed all over the years is that such mental issues are attributed to women because of the nature of their bodies. In her article entitled: **"Mad Embodiments: Female Corporeality and Insanity in Janet Frame's *Faces***

in the Water **and Sylvia Plath's** ***The Bell Jar***" Vanela Oikkonen claims that there is an association between females' lunacy and the metamorphoses that her body undergoes:

> *"For more than two thousand years, madness has carried strong associations with female corporeality. While the assumed cause of insanity has varied from the ancient "wandering womb" to the more modern PMS, the gendered associations of madness have not changed significantly. Not surprisingly, one of the main targets of feminist criticism since the early 1970s have been the representations of mad women in cultural and medical texts. While some feminists have criticized these representations for equating women with their bodies by connecting mental instability with menarche, menstruation, pregnancy and menopause."*[10]

In this respect, madness has been de-contextualized to be related to everything which is "feminine". Thus, due to the difference in women's body construction and the series of the metamorphoses that they are subjected to when they menstruate, have their premenstrual syndrome or become pregnant, men tend to despise them considering them as "vulnerable" creatures. Therefore, they believe that they are more susceptible to mental illness than males.

Another feminist scholar who tackles the issue of "mental illness" and focuses of female madness as a sign of resistance is Elaine Showalter. Much of her attention is devoted to the discourses on women and madness since the 19th century. She believes that female madness (often labeled hysteria) can be perceived as a kind of women's unconscious protest. She also says that the prevalent psycho-cultural point of view "sees an equation between femininity and insanity" while feminist research tools seek to dismantle this biased binarism. She claims that Contemporary feminist philosophers, literary critics, and social theorists are first to draw attention to the existence of a fundamental alliance between "woman" and "madness". She continues:

> *"They have shown how women, within our dualistic systems of language and representation, are typically situated on the side of irrationality, silence, nature, and body, while men are situated on the side of reason, discourse, culture, and mind. They have analyzed and illuminated a cultural tradition that represents 'woman' madness."* [11]

Indeed, there is a sort of a binary opposition between men and women where women are having some negative traits/characteristics such as: irrationality, impulsiveness, recklessness and indulgence whilst men are endowed with the most perfect qualities like: rationality, reason, logic and restraint. This dualistic system of language is unfair with women. This is why some feminist critics and authors employ this mental instrument,"madness"; to mold it in a manner that will be a convenient strategy to demonstrate that women are sufficiently aware of their power and their worth in the society; and this is the core idea of this article. One of the most outstanding authors who adequately displays such stand is Maxine Hong Kingston's in her novel: ***The Woman Warrior: Memories of Girlhood among Ghosts***.

Published in 1976, this semi-autobiographical novel is a depiction of some Chinese females' immigrants' experience in the United States, a group of women who struggle to resist two opposing codes: The Chinese and the American respectively. The story is divided into five sections; each one has a name and a female character: No Name Woman, White Tigers, Shaman, At the Western Palace, A Song of a Barbarian Reed Pipe.

Through a blending of fact and fiction, Maxine tends to transmit the message that she refuses reality and the way it is represented by the two opposing codes. She also utilizes metaphorical madness as a strategy to create a new reality. The author divides her insane characters into two categories: some suffering from clinical madness and others enduring metaphorical madness. The focus in this article is going to be on two female characters, namely, No Name Woman (Hong's aunt) and Moon Orchid (the sister of Hong's Mom Brave Orchid). Through her narrative, the author discusses many themes that represent the core of any Chinese family, among them marriage, a sensitive topic in the Chinese culture due to its pivotal role in ensuring the girl's happiness.

II. MARRIAGE AS AN IDEAL INSTITUTION TO GRANT CITIZENSHIP FOR FEMALES

Marriage in the Chinese community is among the most sacred kinship relationships on earth. It consists of a wife who must be dutiful, passive, weak, and inferior showing obedience to her husband at the expense of her health and her mental stability. The Chinese wife lives with her family-in-law to hold the burden of serving the whole family members without complaining. It is worthily mentioned that most marriages in China are arranged and this is part of the culture because the Chinese do not believe what is called an "individual identity; they rather develop a collective one[12]. In this story, both No Name woman and Moon Orchid have arranged marriages. Moreover, Moon Orchid's husband is younger than her. Maxine learned through her mother that women in China will grow up to be wives and slaves: "When Chinese girls listened to the adults talk-story, we learned that we failed if we grew up to be but wives or slaves"[13].

Chinese immigrants used to quit China to America in an attempt to improve their situation leaving their families behind. Nonetheless, it was impossible for women to travel without their husbands or go there without having citizenship because marriage was the gateway through which these females guarantee their citizenship. It is customary in the Chinese culture that women fully depend on their husbands in all aspects of life; this is why they have to obey the conventional laws - marriage is among them-to be qualified as perfect "housewives". Hence, Maxine notably tackles the issue of marriage and how it is presumed to be a sort of refuge for women:

> *"Since immigration laws discouraged the formation of Chinese immigrant families, marriage is encoded as a language of necessity and rationality within and by the community so that Chinese male*

> *immigrants might return to China or reunite with their wives in America."*[14]

Marriage for the Chinese women is supposed to be their winning card, an immune system that would improve their life, ensure their happiness, foster their success and guarantee citizenship. Yet, it is not the case for "No Name Woman" and Moon Orchid who refused to follow their husbands and remained in their homeland.

By refusing citizenship and declining that marriage is an ideal institution that paves the way towards eternal happiness, both No Name woman and Moon Orchid are considered as "irrational"; their behavior would seem weird for the society they live in and therefore they will be considered as "mad" women; that is why they were excluded from the community's phallocentric discourse, and by extension, their rejection leads to their exclusion from the Chinese as well as the Chinese American community. Accordingly, they are considered as "ghosts" or perhaps "monsters" for not following the crowd:

> *"The monster woman is the woman who refuses to be selfless, acts on her own initiative, who has a story to tell in short, a woman who rejects the submissive role patriarchy has reserved for her."*[15]

Maxine chooses the no-name woman to show that she was able to opt for a unique path; she refuses to remain under the mercy of someone else's name, a shadow of a man under the institution of marriage. She might chooses to love and be loved, she chooses to desire and be desirable, she chooses to live she chooses to tell a different story despite the prejudices. She chooses to resist and be "mad".

III. MADNESS AS A MENTAL ILLNESS GENERATED BY THE PHALLOCENTRIC DISCOURSE

The result of the female character's rejection of and non-reconciliation with the social order is dire. In addition to their social exclusion, both are regarded as mad in terms of "race and gender". Maxine's Aunt decided to forget about her husband's desertion. She did not wait for him; rather she dared desire by celebrating her body instead and eventually committing adultery and giving birth to an illegitimate child. She, "combed individuality into her bob and maintained a perfect hairline and immaculately threaded eyebrows"[16]. Likewise, the aunt refused to name her daughter after her father's name as a denial of her father's reproductive power or any man else's. Moon Orchid, on the other hand, refused her husband's services - despite her passivity -because she overheard that he started a new life and abandoned her along with her daughter. Moon Orchid refused to respond to her daughter's willingness to reunite with her husband and make a small "happy" family: "You're a grown woman with a husband and children of your own. You don't need a father—or a mother either"[17]. Both characters were not able to cope with the inherited structures of the Chinese society; No Name's aunt is perceived as "metaphorically mad" while Moon Orchid's fate is to be "clinically mad":

> *"It is clear that for a woman to be healthy she must 'adjust' to and accept the behavioral norms for her sex even though these kinds of behavior are generally regarded as less socially desirable."* [18]

Thus, women's sanity is determined according to their obedience and conformity to the rules imposed by patriarch in the society they belong to. The more they demonstrate their tolerance and acceptance of the rules the more they will be praised and declared as "aware" ,"conscious" or "rational" creatures.

Another example of a female character who exhibits a different form of rebellion against the exigencies imposed by the patriarchal Chinese society is the protagonist's mother Brave Orchid. Unlike the passive role of the No Name aunt, Brave Orchid was a determined woman; she was able to finance her own education to avoid staying helplessly at home waiting for her husband's benevolence. She is a strong and independent woman who succeeded to make a living and to look after her family through her job. Brave Orchid is a very pragmatic mature woman who is able to combine folk medicine; and magic with the Western medicine she learned at school. Though she believed in ghosts' existence, she had a firm conviction that reality can defeat them: "She is intelligent, alert, pretty. I can't tell if she's happy"[19]

> *"But the Communists wear a blue plainness dotted with one red Mao button. My mother wore a silk robe and western shoes with big heels, and she rode home carried in a sedan chair. She had gone away ordinary and come back miraculous, like the ancient magicians who came down from the mountains."*[19]

Anyone who refuses to conform to the social norms imposed by the patriarchal society and shows a kind of resistance is viewed as "insane". Madness – metaphorically speaking- is a tool to liberate the female spirit and offer her the ability to live and decide her own destiny. Madness, therefore, voices the voiceless. Nevertheless, Moon Orchid's madness was severely appalling owing to her frustration with her life in China as well as in America. Therefore, she ended up in the asylum where she felt safe and secure. The asylum therefore offers her "visibility".

IV. THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE ASYLUM AND FEMALE INMATES

Moon Orchid might be the weakest female character in the novel. She was passive, obedient, submissive, and dependent. She did not even attempt to find a decent job to help her daughter; she became a burden instead. Like Brave Orchid's husband, Moon orchid's left China to seek fortune in America. But she preferred to stay in her homeland because she was accustomed to the traditional style of the upper-class Chinese woman; yet Brave Orchid succeeded in convincing her to leave China, follow her husband to America; and live there together as a family. Once she reached the U.S.A. she figured out that her husband had married again and was living a perfect life with his new family and his young and beautiful wife who knows very well how to deal with his customers. Moon Orchid could not accept this situation and became mad. Indeed, she was not able to fight for her husband so as to save her marriage and bring her family together again. She neither showed resistance nor was capable of integrating with the Chinese or even the American society, which led to her exclusion by her husband. On the contrary, she became paranoid and insane believing that she was haunted by Mexican ghosts. By being

mad and schizoid, Moon Orchid decided to forgo her old reality that she could no longer deal with for the sake of embracing a new one, a new life in which she felt comfortable and happy .The only place she could identify herself with was the "asylum"; her new comfortable universe:

> *"Oh, Sister, I am so happy here. No one ever leaves. Isn't that wonderful? We are all women here. Come. I want you to meet my daughters." She introduced Brave Orchid to each inmate in the ward—her daughters. She was especially proud of the pregnant ones. "My dear pregnant daughters." She touched the women on the head, straightened collars, tucked blankets. "How are you today, dear daughter?" "And, you know," she said to Brave Orchid, "we understand one another here. We speak the same language, the very same. They understand me, and I understand them." Sure enough, the women smiled back at her and reached out to touch her as she went by. She had a new story, and yet she slipped entirely away, not waking up one morning."* [20]

The rejection that Moon Orchid received in her entourage devastated her; it increased her trauma and worsened her mental stability. She started speaking with different codes and was unable to communicate with her family, which led her sister to take her to the asylum in California. There, she could identify with mad women; she even favored their company over her family. It was the only place where she could feel safe and sane. The only people who were able to understand her were the female inmates. Therefore, Moon Orchid exotic behavior was a self-defense mechanism against the patriarchal society either in China or in the USA:

> *"What made you think anyone was after you?"*
> *"I heard them talking about me. I snuck up on them and heard them."*
> *"But you don't understand Mexican words."*
> *"They were speaking English."*
> *"You don't understand English words."*
> *"This time, miraculously, I understood. I decoded their speech. I penetrated the words and understood what was happening inside."* [21]

The asylum connotes the Promised Land for any woman who seeks liberation and emancipation from the prison she used to live in; it is the refuge, the shelter where our character found solace. Through the development of this character, it was figured out that she was transformed from a taciturn, weak, indecisive, confused person, to a powerful woman who was able for the first time to determine her own fate rather than permit others to penetrate her own privacy. The asylum, therefore, would be a serene place for any female willing to stop being a voiceless woman shaped and programmed by male-defined roles. This is how the voiceless become voiced. As far as the female inmates in the asylum are concerned, they are the embodiment of anyone who values women's thoughts and embraces them. They show their solidarity and their intention to listen to, care for and support each other. Clearly, it can be said that, for the first time Moon Orchid become a warrior; yet it was too late because she became "clinically" mad. She succeeds however to leave the social codes and starts living her own!

Maxine herself usually pretends that she is mad or lunatic when she decides to escape the tyranny forced by her surrounding and her mother's demands or when

the latter brings her a groom. Maxine transforms into a clumsy person to escape any kind of arranged marriage:

> *"I did not want to be our crazy one. Quite often the big loud women came shouting into the house, "Now when you sell this one, I'd like to buy her to be my maid." Then they laughed. They always said that about my sister, not me because I dropped dishes at them. I picked my nose while I was cooking and serving. My clothes were wrinkled even though we owned a laundry. Indeed I was getting stranger every day. I affected a limp. And, of course, the mysterious disease I had had might have been dormant and contagious."* [22]

Maxine neither wants to be a wife nor a slave; she always rebels and refuses her mother's orders, which causes her punishment. She does not want to have the same fate as her mother's, sisters' or aunts'. She always seeks to defy the rules and regulations inflicted on women by the Chinese community. She wants to become the woman she wishes not what society intends to turn her into, she is willing to be a "woman warrior" similar to the ones whom her mother used to talk about in her stories. These narratives are indeed an inspiration for her. They are considered as a gateway through which she can identify herself with and discovers a sense of belonging:

> *"She 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."* [23]

The study of the character of Maxine's mother reveals a conspicuous contradiction. On the one hand, she tells her daughters stories of females' perseverance, determination and aspiration to fulfill their dreams in spite of the restrictive and the perspective nature of the Chinese and the Chinese American society; on the other hand, she always obliges them to blindly follow the rules and be obedient girls and good housewives More importantly, she wants them to be enslaved by male authority Nevertheless, the protagonist is extremely influenced by the story of the legend Fa Mu Lan who fought side by side next to her husband against the enemy who wanted to take their lands. The latter inspires her to fight for her desires and wishes even if she would become a "woman warrior" to accomplish what she wants. Maxine finally realizes that being accused, labeled - by the American or the Chinese American community- or even becoming mad is relentlessly inevitable since it is the gateway towards her "self-realization". Moreover, it is a process that she should never be mortified for.

CONCLUSION

The association of madness with women has a long engagement within history, culture and psychology due to its representation by male defined values and norms. In addition, it is observed that this mental illness is often subjected to a dichotomous study or is in a biased binary opposition.

As literature has been an eyewitness to the misrepresentation of female madness over centuries, it might also be qualified for being a mode of expressing and denouncing the atrocities that were made against them using their mental health as means to silence and marginalize them. One of these authors who took the

initiative to shed light upon this serious issue is Maxine Hong Kingston. Her novels offer a critique of patriarchy within the realm of madness. Through her female characters and their heroic stories, she uses madness as a strategy to overthrow the status quo which silences and marginalizes women. Therefore "madness" is used metaphorically not only to denounce the atrocities and the prejudices which women were subjected to but, more importantly, to create a new world for women, a world in which they would have full control over their bodies and souls without any judgments or misrepresentations. To sum up, madness must be regarded as an abnormal behavior that might affect both sexes and requires thus a serious clinical intervention. [i]

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