

**(De)hyphenated Identity and
Carnavalesque Polyphony:
A Bakhtinian Reading of Hybridity and
Female Characters in Zadie Smith's
White Teeth and Maxine Hong
Kingston's *The Woman Warrior***

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In Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* and Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*¹, the biracial or multiracial identity of British or Jamaican, Bengali and Polish-German origins, or Chinese Americans creates a Bakhtinian carnivalesque polyphony² that serves to undermine the prevailing discourses and deconstruct the hegemony of one single culture. In *The Dialogic Imagination*, M. Bakhtin explains how the novel as a genre with its carnivalesque polyphony suits dialogism because it is in constant dialogue with the hegemonic culture: "Dialogic, multivoiced texts allow a culture's dominant ideology to engage in dialogue with subordinate textual voices" (111). In Smith and Kingston, pop culture inverts authority, carnival overturns hierarchies and narration redefines the nation. It is particularly the carnivalesque polyphony (Holquist, 89) that unsettles the hegemony or the full authority of conservative Thatcherite England³ or mainstream white America. Consequently, it naturally follows that the biracial identity should be both literally and metaphorically dehyphenated⁴.

Liminality⁵ or the "third space of enunciation" (Bhabha, 37) seems to be trespassing the original

threshold. Hybridity seems to transcend the narrative technique to the genre with a play on the novel-autobiography contours verbalizing the experiences of two immigrant women writers in constant dialogism with their female characters. On the surface, the works seem to interest the reader passively in a realist traditional novel while simultaneously engaging and challenging him in a self-conscious metafictional narrative. Bakhtin's "heteroglossia" and "chronotope" (Holquist, 69, 109) add even further dimensions to the spatio-temporal axes, perceived more diachronically than synchronically, more vertically than horizontally in both works. Indeed, both *WT* and *WW* seem to fit Bakhtin's category of the "novelistic intentional hybrids" (Bakhtin, 429). This deprives the official discourse of its authority and authenticity, hence the welter of Classical Chinese, Mandarin, Cantonese, Standard English, American dialect in *WW*, and the same welter of the various Englishes in contemporary England, whether Jamaican, Bengali or Indian, Eastern European, together with Standard English. This welter of languages is reminiscent of Bakhtin's idea of the disruptive and transfiguring power of multivocal

language situations in polyphonic narratives (Holquist,4).

In both Smith and Kingston, a multiplicity of narratives of diverse characters from various continents of the world seems to defy the authorial control or the hegemony of novelistic discourse. The narrative technique is populated by a plurality of voices and perspectives. Since a carnival is a wonderful place to display "otherness" and invert power structures, women overtake the narration and make their voices heard. Significantly enough, in *WT*, it is in the most significant female character Irie that all religions and nationalities are harmoniously blended together though not dissolved in each other. In *WW*, if the mother Brave Orchid is empowered with "voice" and narrative point of view, polyphony is incarnated in her daughter, supposedly Kingston herself. In Smith, there is also a welter of religions such as Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, as well as various sects of some religions. Similarly, in Kingston, though foregrounded, Buddhism is only one amongst many other religions.

In fact, the two works are not only revisionist of language, religions, history and politics but also of gender. It is through "dialogism" that the female

characters spell out their authors' philosophy of the urgent need to dehyphenate marginalized or immigrant minorities and insert them into the mainstream culture. *WT* ends on a feminist note by the British and Bengali husbands Archie and Samad taking their wives with them to the pub, and with Abdul-Colin or Mickey finally opening the previously men-only O'Connell's pub to women. Irie, the Christian Caribbean-British, together with her baby whose father is a Bengali-British Muslim, being either Millat or Magid, ends up with Joshua, the British Jew of German-Polish origin. It is as if one small family is '*polyphony*' incarnate, being a metropolitan microcosmos. *WW*, on the other hand, could be considered wholly feminist, discursively and technically. Kingston's mother Brave Orchid, originally a certified doctor in China, is nothing but a laundry woman in the US. She is archetypally turned from the Chinese masculine *yang* active, educated principle into the feminine passive *yin* follower⁶. Kingston's aunt, Moon Orchid, is a perfect example of the Chinese "slave-wife" (*WW*, 30) turned by her husband and the US into "the madwoman in the attic"⁷. The other aunt, the no-name woman, is forced by family and society to commit suicide and forever disappear in absence and

oblivion. Therefore, the characters are weaker because they are women in a patriarchal society, working-class laundry labourers, or Asian American whether assimilated or not by mainstream white America.

White Teeth embodies Bakhtin's concept of the 'carnavalesque' through the undermining of standard, classical speech with alternative discourses of colloquial dialects and various 'Englishes'. Ironically enough, Millat, the Bengali-British who has grown up in Bangladesh, ends up being "More English than the English" (WT, 406), with an accent like that of the Prince of Wales (WT, 212). This is particularly paradoxical and disappointing to his father Samad and his mother Alsana. Another case in point is how the hegemony of one traditional canonical culture is dismantled by various instances of popular culture. The terrorist attack committed by the radicalized Millat at the end was actually inspired by fantasizing about being like Robert de Niro or Al-Pacino, whose films he is practically addicted to (WT, 222). There are even references to Omar Sharif (WT, 212). It is interesting that the three characters are also biracial. In this pop culture, even heroic legends have deteriorated into more or less Mafia figures. Significantly enough,

grotesque, mocking humour tints all the postmodernist fragmentation of the novel into episodes of characters from various cultural and nationalist backgrounds.

Heteroglossia and *chronotope* are two important Bakhtinian concepts (Bakhtin, 4, 425, 428) underlying *White Teeth*. There are many recurrent references to the complex spatio-temporal space that recognizes the continual proliferation and overlap of discourses. Throughout the novel, there is a persistent stress on the spatial convergence of past, present and future. The first striking words on the very first page of the novel indicate that "What's Past is Prologue", followed by many references to dispelling the myth that there is "a neutral place", "an uncontaminated cavity; the logical endpoint of a thousand years of spaces too crowded and bloody", an ironic reinvigoration of Descartes' idea of the mind as '*tabula rasa*' or a "clean slate" (WT, 517-8). People have to wipe off the slate of ideas like race, land, ownership, faith, blood, etc. (WT, 407). The idea is also reminiscent of the feminist notion of *kenosis* which calls for self-emptying and giving oneself to the world. Irie regards Jamaica as a "blank page", "a place where things simply were", where a Jamaican girl loved a British captain "with no complications, both of them

fresh and untainted and without past or dictated future"(WT, 402).

No fictions, no myths, no lies, no tangled webs _ this is how Irie imagined her homeland. Because *homeland* is one of the magical fantasy words like *unicorn and soul and infinity* that have now passed into the language. And the particular magic of *homeland*, its particular spell over Irie, was that it sounded like a beginning. The beginningest of beginnings. Like the first morning of Eden and the day after apocalypse. A blank page (WT, 402).

Caustically satirical equations, tables and chronological biographies attempt to create a magical realist aura about the convergence of time and space (WT, 244, 246). Birthplaces are accidents and the idea of belonging is "some long, dirty lie" (WT, 407).

Significantly enough, "The Final Space" is the title of the chapter before the last, whose writing is somehow similar to the stream-of-consciousness technique. Bakhtin considers the "zone" "the locus for hearing a voice" (434). In this zone, intentions are refracted because they pass through the zones dominated by other characters. Therefore, no autonomous or authorial voice manipulates words in this "no-man's

land" (Bakhtin, 434). In Smith, the "Final Space" chapter concludes with a delirious kind of babbling that starts with anaphora of the word "space" and ends with the mixing of chromosomes and colour genes, thus comically and even nihilistically blurring the supposedly original sense of national identity or pure race:

After years of corporate synaesthesia, . . . when something is being rebranded, . . . Britain (that was the brief: a new British room, a space for Britain, Britishness, space of Britain, British industrial space cultural space space); they know what is meant when asked how matt chrome makes them feel; and they know what is meant by national identity? Symbols? Paintings? Maps? Music? Air-conditioning? Smiling black children or smiling Chinese children or [tick the box]? They know what they want. . . renamed, rebranded, the answer to every questionnaire nothing nothing space please just space nothing please nothing space (*WT*, 518-9).

The vehement repetition of the words "space" and "nothing" and the use of words like "synthetic" and "rebranded" are ironically anti-climactic, stressing Bakhtin's "heteroglossia", his term for the complex

spatio-temporal space that recognizes heteroglossic identity that defies definition and gives space to antinomy and alterity. This idea of the inbetween or transcultural space keeps resounding and resonating throughout the novel like a refrain until it is culminated in the above text. In a way, this space, despite acknowledging differences, still respects and welcomes the other, very much as Archie, the liberator of the mouse and the Nazi scientist Perret, does.

Language in the above text makes meaning and interpretation shifting and in constant flux, exactly like nationality and identity. In Homi Bhabha's terms (141), narration here redefines the nation. This results in Smith's above description of a new multicultural British identity, black or Chinese or whatever components go into its making. This idea of "layering" is particularly what Bakhtin means by "chronotope", creating Bhabha's third liminal space or Zadie Smith's "neutral" one (*WT*, 518). The synchronic and the diachronic, the temporal and the spatial axes of Bakhtin's "chronotope" all meet at the end of *White Teeth* at Perret's Institute, where the attempt to control colour genes in the mouse, turning it into albino or white, seems to fail. The mouse escapes with the help of

Archie (*WT*, 541-2), a very symbolic character, a white Christian British, married to a black Jamaican-British Clara and befriending a Bengali-British Muslim Samad. Consequently, he seems to incarnate Smith's tenet of neutral space. Bakhtin's "dialogism" seems to empower the characters of Smith as they inhabit this liminal space, even within the language game. The narrator's voice and authority are always defied by the various vernacular accents of the protagonists from all over the world. What Smith does through textual play seems to be an attempt at re-envisioning and rewriting history. Both are engendered by a multiplicity of marginalized characters, depicted in absurd prose and extensively detailed and seemingly realistic and historical episodes.

London, in Smith, is depicted as a cosmopolitan city with more or less global identities going around:

This has been the century of strangers, brown, yellow and white. This has been the century of the great immigrant experiment. It is only this late in the day that you can walk into a playground and find Isaac Leung by the fish pond, Danny Rahman in the football cage, Quang O'Rourke bouncing a basketball, and Irie Jones humming a tune. Children with first and last names on a direct collision course. Names that secrete within them

mass exodus, cramped boats and planes, cold arrivals, medical checks (*WT*, 326).

As impersonated by the main female characters, Clara, Alsana, Irie, and Joyce Chalfen, the idea of the purity of race seems to be greatly undermined. Bearing witness to this is the bond of the Jamaican-British daughter Irie with the British of German-Polish origins Joshua Marcus. Further stressing the idea is Irie's baby whose parents cannot be definitely specified. The baby's father is undeterminably one of the Bengali-British twins Millat and Magid. Even a DNA test cannot determine who the father is.

Same deoxyribonucleic acid. She could not know her baby's decision, what choice it had made, in the race to the gamete. . . This is how her child seemed. A perfectly plotted thing with no real coordinates. A map to an imaginary fatherland (*WT*, 515-6).

Diverse races are at the back of this relationship: Jamaican, Bengali, German, Polish and British. This diversity has been harped on throughout the whole novel. DNA is only one amongst many motifs stressing diversity such as the genetic engineering of Marcus Chalfen's experiment with the mouse (*WT*, 367) and the

cross-pollination of plants (*WT*, 309) undertaken by his wife Joyce.

In her book *The New Flower Power*, Joyce Chalfen, a feminist British Catholic married to a Jewish scientist of Polish-German origins, discusses cross-pollination in a metaphor that clearly transcends literal botany:

Cross-pollination produces more varied offspring that are better able to cope with a changed environment. It is said cross-pollinating plants also tend to produce more and better-quality seeds. If my one-year-old son is anything to go by (a cross-pollination between a lapsed-Catholic horticulturalist feminist, and an intellectual Jew!), then I can certainly vouch for the truth of this (*WT*, 310).

She even sees the "garden's soil like a woman's body _ moving in cycles", "fertile at some times and not others" (*WT*, 402). Ideas like dissolving into one race or the assimilation of one race by the other or the purity of races seem to be replaced by a carnivalesque polyphony of various hybrid voices, more harmonious than discordant, however.

Smith uses two main extended images to convey the multiculturalist note struck by the novel. One is that of

the title "White Teeth", unifying symbols since they characterize all diverse races of the world, regardless of their different colours. Among the various facets of the symbol are "canines" or "ripping teeth" (*WT*, 309), "molars" (*WT*, 208), "root canals" (*WT*, 244, 356), sensitive teeth with nerves exposed (*WT*, 459) and pulled out teeth. Right from the outset of the novel, Clara's teeth problems are highlighted (*WT*, 27). Her root canal is infected (*WT*, 83), a clear indication to her faltering links to her Jamaican heritage. What makes matters worse is her set of false teeth (*WT*, 49, 208) due to an accident that she had as a teen with Rian, crashing the bicycle into a tree. Her daughter Irie feels shocked and even betrayed for finding out about this by the end of the novel. When Ambrosia Bowden, Irie's great grandmother, got impregnated by the British Captain Durham, this is expressed through the root canal metaphor (*WT*, 356). Significantly enough, Irie decides to be a dentist, and even ends up taking Joshua Chalfen to Jamaica, the land of her ancestors. This implies a multicultural heterogeneity of Jamaican-British, Bengali-British as well as Polish-German British. This is consecutively represented by Irie, her unborn, fatherless baby, and Joshua Chalfen. The other

extended metaphor is that of the eventual escape of the genetically programmed mouse (*WT*, 367). The attempt to change the colour of the mouse to white is also significant.

Smith's treatment of the narrow-minded vision of characters from various races is satirical. She does not really take sides; she is even ironic of Hortense and Clara, who seem to impersonate her biracial identity, the Jamaican-British. The life journeys of Hortense, Clara, Alsana, and Joyce Chalfen crystallize multiculturalism more clearly than a special feminist strife. Kingston, on the other hand, seems to use Chinese heritage and mythology symbolically, triggering off a specific feminist call mainly implied by the Chinese-American experience. The act of narration by two women is itself emblematic of the power imparted on women to tell their unique stories.

Through the interchange of the names of their girls, mothers in Smith think they might, thus, be securing an easier life without racism; the white is called Sita while the Pakistani is called Sharon, since "her mother thought it best _ less trouble" (*WT*, 327).

Yet, despite all the mixing up, despite the fact that we have finally slipped into each other's lives with reasonable comfort (like a man returning to his lover's bed after a midnight walk), despite all this, it is still hard to admit that there is no one more English than the Indian, no one more Indian than the English. There still young white men who are *angry* about that.

But it makes an immigrant laugh to hear the fears of the nationalist, scared of infection, penetration, miscegenation, when this is small fry, *peanuts*, compared to what the immigrant fears _ dissolution, *disappearance*. (WT, 327).

Subservience or slavery to a single heritage is ironically depicted in Smith. As incarnated by Irie who feels more relaxed to be free of the burden of one and only culture, she ends up with the son of the British Chalfens, themselves symbolic of genetic engineering and hybridity. "She felt her cheeks flush with the warm heat of Chalfenist revelation. So there existed fathers who dealt in the present, who didn't drag history around like a chain and a ball. So there were men who were not neck-high and sinking in the quagmire of the past" (WT, 326).

Contrary to Irie and the Chalfens, we find Iqbal sending his son home for fear of contamination. Ironically enough, it is this particular son who comes back to England being a carbon copy of the scientist Marcus Chalfen. Indeed, he has become "more English than the English", with an accent like that of Prince Charles (*WT*, 366, 212). Similarly, his wife Alsana is scared to death of the idea of interracial marriage, which is sure to undermine the pure Bengali nationality of her upcoming grandchildren. She is horrified by hideous nightmares of "Millat (genetically BB; where B stands for Bengali-ness) marrying someone called Sarah (aa where 'a' stands for Aryan)", having grandchildren whose "Bengali-ness [is] thoroughly diluted, genotype hidden by phenotype" (*WT*, 327). Sarcastically, it is this same son who is bred in England who turns out to be a fanatic extremist, ultimately attempting an assassination of Marcus Chalfen, who, in Millat's opinion, tries to control fate and mess with genes.

Ironically enough, the names for organizations, people and restaurants seem to be paradoxically self-contradictory. KEVIN is a funny, typically British, acronym for an Islamist terrorist association. It is supposed to stand for Keepers of the Eternal and

Victorious Islamic Nation (WT, 301). Another clue to the same effect is the hybridized names of the *halal* restaurant owner Abdul-Colin or Mickey, funnily blending a Muslim prefix meaning 'worshipper of' with a Western name, with a nickname of the typically American Disney cartoon mouse, Mickey. It could be a comic reference to Americanization or globalization, but mainly the absence of a pure identity or nationality. Similarly, the name of the association to which Joshua Chalfen belongs, fighting his father's scientific project is FATE, an important philosophical Islamic tenet that drives Millat to shoot Marcus at the end. The acronym stands for Fighting Animal Torture and Exploitation (WT, 403), but the reasons why Joshua joins are completely different, mainly it is his infatuation by Joely, founder of the association (WT, 479). This is in a way reminiscent of the motive behind Millat's joining of KEVIN, which is the image he retains of the hero in American Mafia movies of De Niro and Al-Pacino. Significantly enough, the stars Millat is impressed by have a dehyphenated identity: European American.

The Bakhtinian idea of *dialogism* is especially manifested in the decisive encounters between the different sides of the three main pairs of the female

characters in *White Teeth*. There is a series of showdowns between Clara and Joyce, Alsana and Joyce and Irie and Joyce. The first turns out to be the mildest, soon giving way to reconciliation; the second is the harshest while the third is the most reasonable. The Bengali Alsana protests to genetic engineering and cloning, alienating her son Magid in the process. She accuses Joyce of, despite her good intentions, waging

'a war between my sons. *You* are splitting them apart! . . . Because *you*, you and your husband, have involved Magid in something so contrary to our culture, to our beliefs, that we barely recognize him!' (WT, 442)

Joyce is desperately trying to save Millat before becoming a terrorist. She thinks if he is cured from ADD, then he will be a better person. Caustically satirical, Irie asks her not to interfere simply because she does not seem to get the insecurity of biracial identity:

'Joyce, he hasn't got a disorder, he's just a Muslim. There are one billion of them. They can't all have ADD.'

'They've been split by their religions, by their cultures. Can you imagine the *trauma*?' (WT, 434)

If one element is psychologically unhealthy, it is the master narrative of nationalism. It recalls Bhabha's idea of nationality (141), where dialogism is not a synthesis but a dialectic between immigrant and host societies. There is creative tension; assimilation does not have to be perfect; and identities are still in flux and like crystals not dissolving in each other. "DissemiNation" is the term Bhabha uses (141) to refer to the necessity of an ambivalence or, according to Bakhtin, a heterogeneous orchestrated polyphony that renders the novel "the maximally complete register of all social voices of the era" (430). According to Bhabha, any country would not, therefore, be devastated by divisions since it will turn into a metropolitan space, where history is re-envisioned and where narration redefines the nation.

If, in our traveling theory, we are alive to the *metamorphicity* of the people of imagined communities _ migrant or metropolitan _ then we shall find that the space of the modern nation-people is never simply horizontal. Their metaphoric movement requires a kind of 'doubleness' in writing; a temporality of representation that moves between cultural formations and social processes without a centred causal logic. The

secular language of interpretation needs to go beyond the horizontal critical gaze if we to give 'the nonsequential energy of lived historical memory and subjectivity' its appropriate narrative authority. We need another time of *writing* that will be able to inscribe the ambivalent and chiasmatic intersections of time and place that constitute the problematic 'modern' experience of the Western nation (*Location of Culture*, 141).

Similarly, Bhabha's term "dissemiNation" informs *The Woman Warrior*, where Maxine Hong Kingston seems to seek the dehyphenation of her female characters through blending feminism with narrative technique. Marginalized Asian Americans in the US and silenced women in China are both given voice and recognition through narration and talk stories. Whether the narrator Kingston is authentically Chinese, American or Asian American, she has celebrated the difference and transcended the exclusion in both cultures simply through "carnavalesque polyphony". The multiplicity of narratives constantly intersecting with Brave Orchid's oral talk stories and Kingston's written memoir and the resonance of various voices of Chinese female characters, together with pop culture

and Hollywood movies _ all effectively celebrate hybridity and transcend marginalization. As a second-generation Asian American, Kingston starts to wonder whether China Town is the simulation or the reality: "I refuse to shy my way anymore through our Chinatown, which tasks me with the old sayings and the stories" (WW, 53). She also wonders whether her knowledge about China is derived from her mother's talk stories and American movies or if it is first-hand information: "What is Chinese tradition and what is the movies?", she asks alluding to the original-replica dilemma:

Chinese Americans, when you try to understand what things in you are Chinese, how do you separate what is peculiar to childhood, to poverty, insanities, one family, your mother who marked your growing with stories, from what is Chinese? (WW, 5-6).

On the other hand, by telling the story of the unnamed aunt that should have been forgotten, Kingston defies willful forgetfulness and challenges the injustice done to women in China. When her aunt was forced to commit suicide by drowning herself and her illegitimate child into the well, she denies herself remembrance and a rebirth.

My aunt haunts me _ her ghost drawn to me because now, after fifty years of neglect, I alone devote pages of paper to her. . . The Chinese are always very frightened of the drowned one, whose weeping ghost, wet hair hanging and skin bloated, waits silently by the water to pull down a substitute (WW, 16).

Like ancient Egyptians with their *shabti* figures in the tomb, the Chinese believe in naming, calling and making paper replicas to secure resurrection. Denying the No-Name aunt this, they sentence her to eternal damnation and afterlife suffering, and make her ghost aimlessly wander.

In the twenty years since I heard this story I have not asked for details nor said my aunt's name. People who can comfort the dead can also chase after them to hurt them further _ a reverse ancestor worship. The real punishment was not the raid swiftly inflicted by the villagers, but the family *deliberately forgetting* her (WW, 16).

Similarly, Kingston's mother, Brave Orchid, is a paradoxical symbol of a living oral archive that combines Chinese heritage and mythology together with modern medical education.

Whenever she had to warn us about life, my mother told stories that ran like this one, a story to grow up on. She tested our strength to establish realities. Those in the emigrant generations who could not reassert brute survival died young and far from home. Those of us in the first American generations have had to figure out how the *invisible* world the emigrants built around our childhoods fits in solid America (WW, 5).

The mother-daughter conflict transcends it to that binarism between oral heritage or Chinese tradition and written autobiography or dreams of emancipation: "Mum did all the talking", "my mother cut my tongue" (WW, 163). Even here, Kingston's attitude is ambivalent:

At last I saw that I too had been in the presence of great power, my mother talking story. . .When we Chinese girls listened to the adults talk-story, we learned that we failed if we grew up to be but wives or slaves. We could be heroines, swordswomen (WW, 20).

It is Kingston's discursive and textual intervention in the rewriting of both Chinese and Asian American narratives, as reflected in the polyphony of voices and the blend of past and present, oral archive and written memoir, that enhances the application of Bhabha's

above "dissemination" model (141). Elsewhere, she metaphorically comments, "The beginning is hers, the ending is mine" (WW, 240). There is a polyphony of voices even within the same nation: in China, Kingston includes Confucian and classical culture, Mandarin together with Cantonese immigrant culture. In the US, we have the polyphony of mainstream white America, together with immigrant minorities, such as Latinos and Asian Americans. Even within the Asian community: we have Chinese, Japanese, etc. Grouping Asian Americans as a homogeneous bulk with no individual differences is criticized:

Once there was an Asian man stabbed next door, words on cloth pinned to his corpse. When the police came around asking questions, my father said, "No read Japanese. Japanese words. Me Chinese." (WW, 52).

The "carnavalesque" in Kingston overturns hierarchies exactly as is the case in festivals, permitting lower orders to occupy space. By the weaker and lower in the hierarchy, we mean Asian American women. Women were generally held to be weaker in China when Kingston was young. Furthermore, by telling their story, Chinese Americans are made to celebrate

their marginality and hybridity. China Town in San Francisco is portrayed both as a simulation of homeland, in another land, and a miniature of the real or a replica of the original (WW, 53). "She sends me on my way, working always and now old, dreaming the dreams about shrinking babies and the sky covered with airplanes and a Chinatown bigger than the ones here" (WW, 109). More grotesque is the pop culture and Hollywood movies about China from which Kingston, as a second-generation American, seems to get her second-hand information (WW, 5-6).

Ambivalent, conflicting feelings of an Asian American girl torn between voices from the past reverberating and intermingling with her present American life as well as her mother's talk story of Fa Mu Lan. Kingston seems to intentionally blur the demarcation line between autobiography and fiction, oral and written memoir, the voices of Brave Orchid and Kingston, dialects and formal speech, speakerly and writerly texts. "One girl _ and another girl," they said, and made our parents ashamed to take us together" (WW, 46). These voices of Chinese peasants intersect with her mother's talk story about Fa Mu Lan and Kingston's dreams when she went to Berkeley:

I went away to college _ Berkeley in the sixties _ and I studied, and I marched to change the world, but I did not turn into a boy. I would have liked to bring myself back as a boy for my parents to welcome with chickens and pigs (*WW*, 47).

Sometimes, it is calculated ambiguity on her part to confuse the reader interchanging the pronouns. She goes on blending reality and fiction. This is particularly obvious in the story of FA Mu Lan, the woman warrior.

My American life has been such a disappointment.

"I got straight A's, Mama."

"Let me tell you a true story about a girl who saved her village."

I could not figure out what was my village. And it was important that I do something big and fine, or else my parents would sell me when we made our way back to China. . . You can't eat straight A's (*WW*, 45-6).

When she realized that straight A's were only for the benefit of her future husband and his family, since she is only a slave wife, she stopped getting straight A's (*WW*, 30, 47).

Feminist strains are clear in the series of innocent questions that her mother reminds her of in her

childhood talk story, significantly intersecting with that of Fa Mu Lan and her dream in Berkley. "Did you roll an egg on *my* face like that when I was born? Did you have a full-month party for me? Why not? Because I'm a girl? (WW, 46). Linguistically, Kingston renders the chauvinism and sexism by equating the semantic import of the feminine pronoun 'I' with slave (WW, 47). The injustice transcends bound feet and slave wives to utter humiliation and even death by water. She always responded with mute yelling; her silence is not due to cowardice but suppression. When the Chinese villagers said that "It is better to raise geese than girls" or push "the girl babies on down the river", "I would scream so hard I couldn't talk" (WW, 46,52).

Exclusion leading to silence is also present in the US with some racists like her boss who called her "Nigger yellow" (WW, 48). Again, when promising to protest against both the Communists and chauvinists in China and the capitalists and racists in America (WW, 49), Kingston mixes bitter reality with fairy tales to incur further estrangement:

From the *fairy tales*, I've learned exactly who the enemy are. I really recognize them _ business-suited in their modern American executive guise, each boss two

feet taller than I am and impossible to meet eye to eye (WW, 48).

In a text similar to those of Zadie Smith when she makes fun of Alsana's pure nationality notion and upholds Irie's universal "neutral space" (WT, 326, 518) and Bhabha's critique of a pure race idea, Kingston clearly states that her belonging is only to her job, ending the futile homeland dialectic.

It's not just the stupid racists that I have to do something about but the tyrants who for whatever reason can deny my family food and work. *My job is my only land* (WW, 49).

It is Kingston as the Woman Warrior Fa Mu Lan in a clearly *Don-Quixotic* stance, with a sword which her hatred of injustice "forged out of the air" (WW, 49), that will conquer and unite America and Asia with the help of the ancestors and the spirits.

To avenge my family, I'd have to storm across China to take back our farm from the Communists; I'd have to rage across the United States to take back the laundry in New York and the one in California. *Nobody in history has conquered and united both North America and Asia* (WW, 49).

The "laundry" (WW, 49, 87) is certainly symbolic of racism since Brave Orchid was forced to forsake her medical profession that she practiced back in China; she has turned from a spiritual *shaman*, both archetypally as a healer and factually as a real certified doctor (WW, 57, 75, 157), to a laundry labourer who fails even to keep her laundry for which she sacrificed her career. Her voice as the talk story teller, however interrupted by other intersecting voices, seems to be louder than all others, shaping her daughter's personality and resisting the *status quo*.

Dehyphenation literally, metaphorically and narratively empowers Asian American women. When working-class women are telling talk stories they invert the hierarchy by presenting the narrative from a different point of view. The inversion is carnivalesque working on four planes: race, ethnicity, social class and gender. The "Reed Pipe Song" at the end of WW is reminiscent of the *samer* tradition in Arabic literature. It is also equally functional in inverting hierarchies. On both sides of the hyphen, Chinese American women seem to be harshly criticized. Kingston herself has been undermined by some chauvinist, sexist Chinese critics,

who accused her of not being "authentically" Chinese (Leiwei, 60, 50) and of trying to portray China's exoticism only to be canonized in American literature and education (Chen, 17). At the other end of the hyphen, some American critics seemed to treat her autobiographical novel more as an ideological, historical and political document rather than judge its aesthetic merits. In one of her interviews, Kingston bitterly resents this politicization of her book (Skandera-Trombley, 95). She even writes a whole essay "Cultural Misreadings" to refute the allegations of some critics (Skandera-Trombley, 95). Even as regards the genre, some critics negatively highlighted the overlap of fact and fiction, autobiography and novel, biracial identities and multiple discourses (Leiwei, 52). In this dehyphenated heterogeneity, territories are overlapping and histories are intertwined, hence deconstructing established mythologies and hegemonic cultures on both sides of the hyphen.

Biracial identity, nevertheless, empowers Kingston instead of weakens her, simply because she seems to have achieved a kind of reconciliation between the self and the other. Sometimes, the other is simultaneously both her distant Chinese heritage and American

exclusion. This is not the case, however, with her aunt Moon Orchid, whose name seems to evoke the sexist stereotype of the lunatic "madwoman in the attic" (WW, 160). "We understand one another here. We speak the same language, the very same", Moon Orchid told her sister Brave Orchid at the asylum after having "shrunk to bone" (WW, 160). Her tragic end at the asylum is mainly due to her ignorance of the English language, together with the discriminatory Asian Exclusion Act in 1924 depriving wives of immigrants to join them in the US (WW, 124), even if their husbands have become American citizens (Leiwei, 61), leading Moon Orchid's husband to leave her in China and get himself a new wife. Even at the asylum, however, what was left for her was her stock of stories, whose abundance was finished only with her death. "She had a new story, and yet she slipped entirely away, not waking up one morning" (WW, 160). In the cases of Brave Orchid and Moon Orchid, the bicultural dialogue was not really empowering. Contrary to this is the case of Kingston herself, simply because her biracial identity was dehyphenated. She does not need the juxtaposition with the other to define herself or even the official Chinese or American acknowledgement to be a

legitimate heir to the culture or the authentic representative of any of the two civilizations. Similarly, there seems to be a dialogism between the narrator's voice and the protagonists interfering and modifying the narration themselves. The dialectic is very intense and vivid between heritage and modernity, China and America, mother and daughter, oral archive and written narratives, all inextricably mixed, though clearly articulated. Men are in the background, with an ostensibly subdued voice and discourse.

Everything, even interpretation and genre, seems in flux. The reader crosses boundaries of race, language and gender, only to get enmeshed in the liminality of the mother's talk-stories and the daughter's somehow polished version. It is this threshold, or the present and past in flux, that recalls Bakhtin's "chronotope" and "heteroglossia" (431). The inbetween limen or transcultural threshold in Kingston is incredibly layered, entertaining difference and allowing the overlap of discourses. Kingston laments that her aunt Moon Orchid did not enjoy the same feeling: "my aunt crossed boundaries not delineated in space" (WW, 8). Significantly enough, the distinction Brave Orchid, the protector of oral archive, makes to her children

between the sane and the insane (referring to Moon Orchid) is related to narratives and storytelling: "sane people have variety when they talk-story. Mad people have only one story that they talk over and over" (WW, 159). The convergence in her aunt's case of present, past and future was not materialized in time and space, in other words, the layers were not reconciled. Contrary to the muteness of her aunts Moon Orchid and No-Name woman, stands the lucid eloquence of Kingston, even as a teenager. In Kingston's case the temporal and spatial axes seem to overlap, concretizing her representation of Chinese and American alike. In Kingston, Bakhtin's "heteroglossia" or the dialogic relationship and the spatio-temporal convergence between past, present and future seem to be powerfully embedded in time and space. Therefore, it is in her that the narrative strands meet, hence Bakhtin's "chronotope".

"Ghosts" is a symbol that beautifully embodies Bakhtin's chronotope, unraveling its "thick" layers, to use Clifford Geertz's term⁸. If "chronotope" is the place where the narrative knots are constructively tied and untied, cultural interpretation is deliberately challenged. The interpretation of "ghosts" is also

intentionally in flux, defying a fixed meaning. "Ghosts" in Kingston can be a reference to the ancient Chinese myths and traditions haunting female characters, male hegemony in a patriarchal society, or American foreigners. Americans here sometimes include other minority groups like Mexicans or even Asians like the Japanese. Moon Orchid seems to hallucinate about Mexican ghosts planning to kill her (WW, 156). Therefore, even the marginalized are not absolved of the sin of discrimination against similar minorities. Even amongst the minorities, there is liminality, disunification and alterity. There is a constant process of decentralization: linguistically, culturally and even ideologically. For instance, both communism and capitalism, in other words, both China and America, are harshly criticized as ghosts haunting the female characters (WW, 49). These cynic ghosts sardonically undermine and cut across Kingston's self-confident narration. The family of the No-Name aunt cursed her, "Death is coming. Look what you've done. You've killed us. Ghost! Dead ghost! Ghost!" (WW, 13-14). Her ghost haunts Kingston because she has rescued her from oblivion by narrating her story (WW, 16). Brave Orchid reiterates what Kingston herself sometimes desperately

feels: "This is terrible ghost country, where a human being works her life away" (*WW*, 104).

Both Kingston's *WW* and Smith's *WT* fit Bakhtin's description of the novel as inherently multivocal and intrinsically polyphonic. It is a multicultural, polyphonic and heterogeneous narrative as regards the purity of genre, narrator, narrative technique and type of speech. Hybridity, therefore, is best reflected in the hybrid narrative technique. This is best manifested technically by disrupting the traditional, omniscient or authoritative narrative point of view. The subversive, counter-discursive technique of Kingston versus her mother and the Chinese aunts simultaneously locates a resistance model challenging mainstream American culture, as Smith's carnivalesque polyphony and hybridity challenge conservative mainstream British identity. In both cases, immigrant identities are no longer perceived as diluting the original pure nationality but enriching it. Female characters are not necessarily feminists. Their significance is that they are multiculturalism incarnate. In *WT*, although Joyce is a feminist, she primarily tries to reach out to the Other, even if her methods are not totally sound. In *WW*, only one of all the female characters seems to comment on

chauvinism and sexism, Kingston as narrator, author and protagonist. Therefore, the study focuses on female characters not as feminists but as polyphony incarnate.

The authenticity of Kingston as representative of the Chinese, the Americans, or the Chinese American is undermined all the time. Similarly, in Smith's *WT*, no pure identity is the true speaker of Britain or the rightful heir to pure British nationality. The idea of host versus migrant society is no longer as clear-cut as before. Pluralism, hybridity and multicultural heterogeneity are best exemplified in the carnivalesque polyphony, the multiplicity of narratives, and the postmodern fragmentation defying master narratives such as nationalism and the superiority of one race or sex to the other. In both works, the female characters are the ones instigating this revolution, mainly through their multiplicity of narratives. Whether in England or America, the "narration" undertaken by the dehyphenated female characters in *White Teeth* and *The Woman Warrior* seems to discursively reshape or textually redefine the nation.

Notes

1. Henceforth referred to as *WT* and *WW*.

2. Particularly enlightening is Bakhtin's *The Dialogic Imagination*, especially the following chapters: "Novelness as Dialogue" and "Authoring as Dialogue" (67, 149). "Textual Space and Genres" (70) is also very illuminating as regards "heteroglossia" and "chronotope" (434). Also refer to Holquist's *Dialogism: Bakhtin and His World* for a very lucid account of carnivalesque polyphony and chronotope (89, 109, 112).

3. The time span of *WT* covers 143 years, starting 1857 and ending at the beginning of 2000. The action goes backward and forward through flashback and foreshadowing. The titles of sections relate the main protagonists to the time span of their life history. "Irie 1990, 1907" is a case in point.

4. The play on words in "(de)hyphenated" is intended to undermine the use of the hyphen to designate the biracial identity. This was an attempt to assimilate second and third generations of immigrants into mainstream American culture. For further reference, see the cited Victoria Chen and David Leiwei.

5. The term "limen" is originally psychological designating the threshold between conscious and unconscious. In Bhabha, hybridity could inhabit liminality,

thus opening passages that entertain difference and emphasize polyphony and heterogeneity. It also implies Bakhtin's novelistic or textual space where carnival inverts imposed hierarchy and undermines hegemony (Bhabha, 4).

6. The Chinese *yang* also recalls Carl Jung's *animus* archetype which represents the logical, thinking, intellectual and adventurous side of women, and is symbolized by swords, which is the case of Fa Mu Lan in Kingston. See Snowden's *Jung*.

7. The celebrated feminist phrase entitles Gilbert & Gubar's book, alluding to "the madwoman in the attic" in Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre* to embody the abuse of women in a patriarchal society.

8. Clifford Geertz' "thick description" is a term that indicates cultural and anthropological layering, enriching human experience.

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