

Discussion Board Questions for Kingston

Reading Assignment 1, "No Name Woman," "White Tigers," "Shaman"

1. What are the significant dimensions of the relationship with her unnamed aunt that Kingston attempts to develop by writing about her? What kind of "ancestral help" does she seek? Why does she need such help? Why seek it from this distant, unknown and unknowable woman?
2. How does Maxine attempt to negotiate her cultural identities? Why is this so difficult, or if you prefer, what are some of the specific challenges involved in understanding her cultural identities?
3. How would you describe Brave Orchid as a mother? Discuss the various positive and negative effects/influences she has on Maxine, her sense of self and belonging, and her sense of possibility.
4. Why does Maxine imagine herself as a warrior, based loosely on Fa Mu Lan? What contradictions are presented in the story of the fantasy warrior self? How are these conflicts related to her life and struggles in reality?
5. Analyze Brave Orchid's encounter with the sitting ghost at medical school. What might the ghost symbolize? How is this final scene related to the final scene of the chapter involving a grown Maxine at home with her mother?
6. Why do you think Kingston has chosen to write chapters primarily about the No Name Woman, a fantasy Fa Mu Lan-self, and Brave Orchid? How, if at all, are these women connected? What role does each, or do they collectively, play in Kingston's memoir project of understanding and representing the self?

Reading Assignment 2, "At the Western Palace," "Song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe"

1. In "At the Western Palace," Brave Orchid is the driving force behind her sister Moon Orchid's confrontation with her husband. In her relentless pushing of Mood Orchid we see a frightening side of Brave Orchid. What do you think motivates Brave Orchid? Why is she so relentless? Why does it mean so much to her (more than to Moon Orchid) that this man be confronted?
2. "At the Western Palace" is very unusual for a memoir chapter because the author is not present in the story at all. We later find out she only heard the story second- or third-hand. If memoir is a project of exploring and representing who one is and how she became that person, how is this chapter related to that project for Kingston? How does this chapter relate to Maxine's identity and Kingston's sense of self? What does this chapter, in connection with the others reveal as the ways Kingston expands the concept of memoir? To what degree do you feel that Kingston has achieved a sense of resolution at the end of her memoir? Is there resolution between herself and her mother? In her negotiation of cultural identities? In her sense of identity?
3. The motifs of silence and speech and theme of finding voice are prevalent throughout the memoir but foregrounded especially in the final chapter. What seem to be the causes of Maxine's difficulty in speaking and finding her voice/self? Consider especially how this challenge is related to her mother, gender, and cultural factors both Chinese and American.

4. Why and why does Kingston tell the story of T'sai Yen? How might this important figure be seen in comparison to both Brave Orchid and Maxine? How might the story comment on the relationship between mother and daughter?
5. To what degree do you feel that Kingston has achieved a sense of resolution at the end of her memoir? Is there resolution between herself and her mother? In her negotiation of cultural identities? In her sense of identity?