

**FROM SELF-FRAGMENTATION TO IDENTITY CRISIS IN MAXINE
HONG KINGSTON'S *THE WOMAN WARRIOR*, Konan Joachim Arnaud
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Abstract

This paper explores the issues of social inclusion and identity assumption in a context of cultural in-betweenness, patriarchy, and racism, where the dominant culture is viewed as the norm. Drawing on Erik Erikson's model of psychosocial development, the article aims to highlight the difficulties of self-assertion and the identity crisis faced by a Chinese-American teenage girl in Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts*. Set in the 1950s and 1960s, the novel portrays the hardships of a young Chinese-American character born to Chinese immigrants in the United States of America. The challenges of growing up as a girl and a member of a minority group in a racist country are the focus of this novel where the mood at work is filled with the character's inner tensions while constructing her identity. While examining the main protagonist's journey from young age to adolescence, the present paper uniquely examines the social and existential uneasiness of this character. In so doing, it argues that the identity crisis she suffers from is the result of the successive failures of the different developmental stages preceding adolescence, which is a critical phase in every individual's identity construction.

Keywords : Adolescence, cultural in betweenness, identity crisis, patriarchy, psychosocial development, uneasiness

**DE LA FRAGMENTATION DE SOI À LA CRISE IDENTITAIRE DANS
THE WOMAN WARRIOR DE MAXINE HONG KINGSTON**

Résumé

Cet article examine les problématiques d'insertion sociale et d'assomption d'identité dans un contexte d'entre-deux culturel, de patriarcat et de racisme, où la culture dominante est considérée comme la norme. En s'appuyant sur le modèle de développement psychosocial d'Erik Erikson, cet article vise à mettre en évidence les difficultés d'affirmation de soi et la crise d'identité rencontrées par une adolescente sino-américaine dans *The Woman Warrior : Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts* de Maxine Hong Kingston. Se déroulant dans les années 1950 et 1960, le roman dépeint les difficultés d'un jeune personnage sino-américain né d'immigrants chinois aux États-Unis d'Amérique. Les difficultés de grandir en tant que fille et membre d'un groupe minoritaire dans un pays raciste sont au cœur de ce roman où l'ambiance à l'œuvre est empreinte de tensions intérieures du personnage dans la construction de son identité. Examinant le parcours du principal protagoniste depuis son jeune âge jusqu'à son adolescence, cet article se penche uniquement sur le mal-être social et existentiel de ce personnage. Ce faisant, il montre que la crise identitaire dont elle souffre est le résultat des échecs successifs des différentes étapes du développement précédant l'adolescence, une phase critique dans la construction de l'identité de chaque individu.

Mots clés : Adolescence, crise identitaire, entre-deux culturel, mal-être, patriarcat, développement psychosocial

Introduction

As human beings, we often find ourselves navigating the complexities of our identities and struggling to make sense of our place in the world. This is particularly acute for those who have experienced self-fragmentation, a state in which the various aspects of their identity seem disconnected and disjointed. In twentieth-century America, persistent racism profoundly affected the lives of the many ethnic minorities that had immigrated in the country, including the Chinese Americans who were officially excluded by the “Chinese Exclusion Act” of 1882. As a result, members of this community and their descendants came to know only the periphery and margins of American society, victims of social and economic restrictions that severely limited their lives, while white Americans enjoyed all the privileges and opportunities of life.

With the emergence of Chinese American writers in the 1960s, most of whom were second-generation, their fictional works began to reflect this experience and its impact. One prominent female writer of this community is Maxine Hong Kingston, whose semi-autobiographical narratives often explore the social integration of Chinese American ethnic minority youth. In her literary masterpiece, *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts* (1976), Kingston delves into the complex journey of self-discovery and identity crisis experienced by the protagonist, who is also the narrator. The novel also explores the challenges of growing up as a Chinese-American girl in a predominantly white American society and the struggles of reconciling two different cultures. Through the fictitious representation, we are taken on a journey through the protagonist's experiences of self-fragmentation and her resulting identity crisis during her adolescence.

Adolescence, as transitional period between childhood and adulthood, is characterized by physical changes and often, mental disorders, which can lead to an identity crisis. That is exactly what Kingston's protagonist, a teenager, struggles with. Raised in a context of cultural in-betweenness, patriarchy and racism, where the dominant white culture is considered the norm, the main character struggles to define herself and thrive socially.

The interest of this reflection lies in examining the conditions of the psychosocial development of a young character in the selected study text. So the key question here is how do the concepts of cultural hybridity, patriarchal discourse, and racism collectively impede the process of identity formation among Chinese immigrant children in the novel? How are the sufferings of that adolescent articulated in this work?

These questions serve as entry points to explore the complexities of the protagonist's journey of self-discovery and identity crisis. By examining these questions, one can gain a deeper understanding of the challenges faced by female Chinese-American adolescents in reconciling their heritage with their American identity. On the strength of the theory of the German-American developmental psychologist and psychoanalyst Erik Erikson, our approach leads to the discovery that the identity crisis of this adolescent is the result of a series of failures in the realization of the phases of her psychosocial development. Erik Erikson's

developmental model will help to see the growth of the protagonist's personality through her self-fragmentation to her identity crisis in the narrative frames of this novel.

The protagonist, a Chinese-American teenager, faces a constant dilemma between asserting her Chinese identity inherited from her immigrant parents and the American identity acquired through birthplace called *jus soli*¹. While her parents consider her American citizen, mainstream white American society rejects her as Chinese citizen. Erik Erikson rightly posits in *Childhood and Society* (1950) that adolescence is a crucial stage in any individual's identity formation. At this stage of notoriously complex physical, psychological, and physiological development, the young Chinese-American female character experiences a sense of social and existential uneasiness, leading to self-fragmentation and an identity crisis.

1. Social Uneasiness and Self Fragmentation

The turn of the 1970s and 1980s in the United States was a period marked by the emergence of debates on social issues related to the expression of double citizenship, resulting from the waves of migration that greatly reconfigured the cultural landscape of this country, even to the point of being called multicultural. The initiators of these debates, largely born to parents from these immigrant's groups, criticized the white community's lack of tolerance towards immigrants, but also the immigrants towards their offspring.

These criticisms focus on the impact that intolerance of diversity has on the most vulnerable members of these minority communities, namely adolescents, for whom living in a tense social climate is not always easy to endure. To this end, in *Biculturalism: A Search for Self Through life Experiences and the Interaction of the People that Influence it*, Allene Patterson addresses this difficulty by stating that "Living between two cultures becomes a serious challenge to people who are positioned in a place, in a society, where they do not fit in and they are not comfortable" (2011, p. 1). For this critic, belonging to two cultural networks is a challenge for any individual, especially when they do not feel integrated into either culture. This is even more challenging when the individual is born and raised in an environment where they are discriminated against, marginalized, and rejected. In another way, it highlights the importance of creating a society where everyone feels welcome and included.

If the environment in which the individual evolves allows him to give meaning to his life and also to define his identity, it can constitute an obstacle to his psychosocial development. In his work, the German-American psychoanalyst, Erik Erikson proposed eight stages of development that represent a conflict that every human being will go through in his lifetime. In *Adolescence and Crisis: The Quest for Identity*, published in 1972, he focuses on the interaction between the adolescent and the immediate environment in which he finds himself during the construction of his or her identity: "At each stage, the person is confronted with, and can master,

¹ The right of the soil (*jus soli* in Latin) is the rule of law attributing a nationality to a natural person because of his or her birth on a given territory, with or without additional conditions because of his birth on a given territory, with or without additional conditions.

new challenges. Each stage builds on the foundation laid in the previous stages. Challenges that are not mastered, or are not mastered, are likely to reappear as problems in the future" (1972, p. 25). The turning point of this period of life should be treated with the utmost delicacy, given its sensitivity, especially when the adolescent is caught between two totally different cultures. When this turning point is poorly negotiated, the adolescent can experience a succession of crises that, in the long run, will hinder the construction of his personal and social identity.

This study focuses on Maxine Hong Kingston's fictional representation of a teenage main character who is located in an in-between context, which serves as a major obstacle to her psychosocial development. Serving as an intertextual reference and precursor in Chinese-American literature, the work highlights a young female character who suffers from and experiences the trauma of exclusion due to her dual cultural background. Very early on, her parents try to shape and mold her by instilling in her the values of the culture and social norms of a Chinese society with which she has only a distant knowledge, in addition to obligating her to learn to speak Chinese. In *Identités meurtrières*, Amin Maalouf sheds light on this issue by showing how others can influence a person's sense of belonging. For him, it is true that what determines a person's belonging to a particular group is essentially the influence of others; the influence of those close to them - family members, fellow countrymen, coreligionists - who seek to appropriate them, and the influence of those on the other side who seek to exclude them. (1998, p. 21). In their attempt to instill a strong sense of belonging to Chinese culture in their offspring, parents will rather find the opposite effect that is self-confusion as highlighted in Amin Maalouf's essay:

And very early on, at home as well as at school or in the neighboring street, the first scratches occur. Others make them feel, through their words, through their looks, that they are poor, or lame, or small in stature, or "long-legged", or dark-skinned, or too blond, or circumcised, or not circumcised, or orphaned - these countless differences, minor or major, that delineate the contours of each personality, shape behaviors, opinions, fears, ambitions, which often turn out to be highly formative but which sometimes hurt forever. (1998, Ibid).

This quotation suggests that early on in life, individuals experience negative treatment and discrimination from others based on their physical appearance, background, or other distinguishing characteristics. These experiences can shape the way they behave, think, and feel about themselves and the world around them. Some of these differences are minor while others may have significant impacts on an individual's personality, opinions, fears, and ambitions. It is also implied that some of these experiences of discrimination may cause lasting emotional pain and trauma. Cultural, linguistic, and gender-biased narratives are major sources of social and existential unease for Chinese-American children, as highlighted in Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* (1976). Kingston, the main character, experiences social malaise and self-fragmentation as she grows up in a family environment that is heavily influenced by traditional and cultural Chinese values. Her parents expect her to adopt the values and principles of her Chinese culture, including submission

to male authority and respect for authority, which are based on Confucianism². Kingston receives her education according to these principles from an early age, with her mother using storytelling to convey the values of their culture. However, she also receives a Western education during the day, which teaches her values that contradict those taught by her parents.

Kingston's upbringing includes being taught the principles of life and good manners through storytelling. She mentions that her mother, Brave Orchid, would use stories to warn them about life. Kingston writes, "Whenever she had to warn us about life, my mother told stories" (1976, p. 5). From this, it can be inferred that storytelling was a common method for parents to convey educational messages and instill cultural values in their children. Allene Patterson (2011) notes that Brave Orchid's storytelling served a dual purpose of connecting her children to their Chinese tradition and stimulating their minds. By telling stories, Brave Orchid is able to transmit Chinese values and beliefs to her children, helping them understand and appreciate their cultural heritage. Patterson explains, "by telling these stories, Brave Orchid was able to provide her children with their connection to Chinese tradition and stimulate their minds" (p. 5). Through storytelling, Chinese-American children are able to experience their culture of origin and learn about their heritage. This suggests that storytelling is a valuable tool for transmitting cultural knowledge from one generation to the next.

Kingston, in addition to the stories she heard at home, is sent to Chinese school at night while receiving a Western education during the day. In the novel, she puts it : "After American school, we picked up our cigar boxes, in which we had arranged books, brushes, and an ink box neatly, and went to Chinese school, from 5:00 to 7:30 p.m." (1976, p. 167). At the Chinese school, cultural ideals and principles are reinforced in a way that encourages Kingston to embrace her Chinese heritage, despite being exposed to American culture on a daily basis through her American school lessons. On the one hand, her parents try their best to preserve Chinese cultural values by passing them on to her at home or in Chinese school. However, the dominant white American culture teaches her principles and values that are in opposition to those taught by his parents. While as a woman, she is encouraged to be submissive and silent, the American culture teaches her values such as independence, freedom of thought, and expression. This creates a sense of discomfort for Kingston, as she is torn between these two conflicting cultural values. Faced with this situation, what attitude to have?

In the novel, Kingston faces a difficult situation and expresses her lack of understanding of the two cultures she belongs to. She even begins to question them. One of the aspects of Chinese culture that worries her the most is the tradition of girls being bound to silence and constantly being told "Don't tell" (Kingston, 1976, p. 15). Although she realizes that a girl's voice can be used for the benefit of her community once she becomes an adult, she is critical of the idea that her voice might be captured and used for someone else's purposes. As she puts it, "You can't entrust your voice to the Chinese, either they want to capture your voice for their own use.

² Chinese philosophical school of thought based on the principles of good manners, wisdom and healthy social relations. Its aim is to educate men who are politically capable, able to serve the community and, morally good men.

They want to fix up your tongue to speak for them.” (Kingston, 1976, p. 169). She is also critical of the attitudes of Chinese adults, given her parents’ expectation that she would become a “wife” and “slave” as an adult. She believes that the adults are not effective in preserving Chinese traditions. For example, she states, “How can Chinese keep any traditions at all? They don’t even make you pay attention, slipping in a ceremony and clearing the table before the children notice specialness. The adults get mad, evasive, and shut you up if you ask.” (Kingston, 1976, p. 185). She also describes the use of physical punishment to enforce these traditions, such as hitting children for waving brooms, dropping chopsticks, or tapping someone with a ruler. Children are punished without warning for washing their hair on certain days or stepping over a brother, regardless of whether they are menstruating or not. Kingston believes that this system of punishment is ineffective in teaching children how to behave and only serves to instill fear. She notes, “You figure out what you got hit for and don’t do it again if you figured correctly” (Kingston, 1976, p. 185).

American culture, which guarantees her freedom of expression, poses another problem in her daily speaking. In fact, she has hard time distinguishing between the words “I” and “Here” in her two native languages, Chinese and English: “I could not understand ‘I’. The Chinese ‘I’ has even strokes intricacies. How could the American ‘I’, assuredly wearing a hat like a Chinese, have only three strokes, the middle so straight? The other troublesome word was ‘here’, no strong consonant to hang on to, and so flat, when ‘here’ is two mountainous ideographs” (1976, p. 167). Here, the narrator describes her struggles in recognizing the words “I” and “here” in both languages. She finds it hard to understand the American “I” with its only three strokes, compared to the Chinese “I,” which has intricate strokes. Similarly, the word “here” poses a challenge as it lacks a strong consonant to hold onto and seems flat when compared to the mountainous ideographs of the Chinese language (1976, *Ibid*). Through the protagonist’s linguistic struggles, Kingston portrays her family and social environment as dysfunctional, leading to the protagonist’s silence. The narrator describes her silence as being “thickest-total” (Kingston, 1976, p. 168). The protagonist’s inability to express herself fully due to linguistic and cultural barriers highlights the difficulties of living between two worlds and the challenges of navigating between them.

Sexism is prevalent within the narrator’s family, and this can be attributed to the cultural principles of Confucianism. In *The Woman Warrior* (1976), the author uses a discourse that differentiates between male and female gender. She references the symbols of Yang and Yin, which are derived from Taoism, a Chinese philosophy that distinguishes between male and female characteristics. The concept of Yang refers to traditionally masculine qualities such as aggression, action, strength, paternalism, logic, and positivity. Meanwhile, Yin refers to traditionally feminine qualities such as weakness, passivity, motherhood, intuition, receptivity, and negativity. By using these concepts, the author highlights the cultural and societal expectations placed upon individuals based on their gender. The narrator’s social benching is a result of these expectations, which prioritize masculine qualities over feminine ones. This reflects the pervasive sexism within the narrator’s family and the wider culture that values traditionally masculine traits over traditionally feminine ones.

According to these criteria, Chinese or Chinese-American girls are treated differently from boys, with the latter being valued more than the former. The heads of the family view girls as "useless" and a "waste of discipline," as illustrated by the statement: "Feeding girls is feeding cowbirds...There's no use wasting all that discipline on a girl. When you raise girls, you're raising children for strangers" (1976, p. 46). Consequently, male children are preferred over female children when a woman is pregnant, as evidenced by the narrator's experience: "I minded that the emigrant villagers shook their heads at my sister and me. 'One girl- and another girl,' they said, and made our parents ashamed to make us out together...The good part about my brothers being born was that people stopped saying, All girls" (1976, Ibid). As a whole, Kingston grapples with the cultural, linguistic, and social challenges she faces as a Chinese-American girl. Her parents perpetuate sexism and traditional gender roles, causing her distress and complicating her sense of identity. She finds herself torn between her Chinese heritage and her American upbringing, struggling to reconcile the two and find a sense of belonging. On one hand, she is also expected to act as a link or a mediator between the different communities and cultures to which she belongs. However, her inability to assume her biculturality inevitably leads her to an identity crisis, as she puts it, "I learned to make my mind large, as the universe is large, so that there is room for paradoxes" (1976, p. 7).

2. The Identity Crisis

The quest for personal identity is a fundamental aspect of being human. However, this process can be complicated, particularly for those who find themselves caught between two nations, cultures, or languages. In such situations, the issue of dual membership can lead to a genuine identity crisis. The term "identity" has a complex and ambiguous character, according to critics Brubaker Rogers and Junqua Frédéric (2001, p. 66) in their work *Au-delà de l'identité*. For them, "the term identity (...) tends to mean too much when understood in a strong sense, too little when understood in a weak sense, and mean nothing at all"³. It is precisely this character that makes this word difficult to define. Despite this difficulty, some definitions have emerged. Among these, the one given by Dominique Picard (2008, p. 76), in the sense that for him, "[Identity is] first and foremost what represents me, what makes me "Me", a being that is unique and different from others, whose boundaries I am able to define"⁴. Similarly, Amine Maalouf (1998, p. 10) states that "my identity is what makes me identical to no other person"⁵. Simply said, personal identity is what makes an individual identical to no other person. According to Picard, personal uniqueness underlies an existence that is recognized and valued by the family and social environment. Additionally, recognizing one's individuality as unique and feeling like part of a social group is

³ Translation is mine : « le terme identité [...] a tendance à signifier trop quand on l'entend au sens fort, trop peu quand on l'entend au sens faible et à ne rien signifier du tout. »

⁴ Translation is mine : « [l'identité c'est] d'abord ce qui me représente, ce qui fait que je suis « Moi », un être unique et différent des autres dont je suis capable de circonscrire les frontières »

⁵ Translation is mine : « mon identité, c'est ce qui fait que je ne suis identique à aucune autre personne »

crucial for maintaining a stable identity. When any of these elements is compromised, the individual may experience confusion, leading to successive crises and social and psychological instability.

Erik Erikson was a pioneering psychoanalyst who introduced the concept of "crisis" in the process of personal identification. He believed that human existence is marked by multiple and successive crises that help individuals achieve maturity or personal unity when they are overcome. In so doing, he identified eight stages of psychosocial development from infancy to old age, and these stages are Infancy or oral sensory from birth to 1 year, early childhood or muscular-anal from 1 to 3 years, play age or locomotors-genital from 3 to 6 years, school age or latency from 6 to 12 years, adolescence from 13 to 19 years, young adulthood from 20 to 39 years, middle adulthood from 40 to 59 years, and old age from 60 years and above (Erik Erickson, 1998, p. 36). In *The Woman Warrior* (1976), the author depicts the stages from birth to adolescence, namely Infancy, early childhood, play age, school age, and adolescence, through the life of the main protagonist, Kingston, who is going through an identity crisis resulting from a series of failures in resolving the crises of the phases before her adolescence.

The Infancy stage is referred to as the oral Sensory stage, during which the contact with the outside world is made through the mouth. The child must be able to trust enough to open up to the world and receive what is given to them by mouth. The behavior of the caregiver, in this case, the mother, is critical in the child's acquisition of this basic trust. If the mother's attachment to the newborn is unconditional, the baby can explore the world with confidence. Successfully passing this stage allows the child to trust that life is truly okay and have basic confidence in the future. Failure to experience trust can cause frustration because the child's needs are not met. As a result, the baby may feel that the world around them is not trustworthy, causing a disturbance in the child's personality development. In *The Woman Warrior* (1976), Kingston's mother cut the frenum of her tongue during her infancy period. The mother explains, "I cut [your tongue] so that you would not be tongue-tied. Your tongue would be able to speak languages that are completely different from one another. You'll be able to pronounce anything. Your frenum looked too tight to do those things, so I cut it" (1976, p. 164). This act was done with the best intentions, but it will prove to be a failure. Kingston's ability to express herself will be affected, resulting in silence and difficulty of expression. This act will also be the source of Kingston's suspicions throughout the narrative, causing her to be wary of the outside world and other members of her family specifically.

In *The Woman Warrior* (1976), Kingston, the character-narrator, experiences difficulties with the second psychological disposition of "autonomy" during the "Early Childhood" phase, which is assumed to be acquired by every child according to Erik Erikson. If a child fails to develop autonomy during this phase, they may develop feelings of shame and doubt about their free will to be themselves. Kingston is born into a patriarchal environment where male children are preferred and privileged, and her parents exert excessive control over her future life choices. Her parents make her understand that her life purpose is to become either a wife or a slave through instructive talk-stories. Kingston and other Chinese girls learn that they will fail if they grow up to be just wives or slaves. However, Kingston desires to be more than that: "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” (1976, p. 19). During this phase, Kingston's confusion and doubt are evident after her mother cuts the frenum of her tongue, which is a painful and powerful act:

I don't remember [my mother cutting my tongue], only her telling me about it, but during all my childhood [...] I used to curl up my tongue in front of the mirror and tauten my frenum into a white line, itself as thin as a razor blade. I thought perhaps I had had two frena, and she had cut one. I made other children open their mouths so I could compare theirs to mine... Sometimes I felt very proud that my mother committed such a powerful act upon me. At other times I was terrified—the first thing my mother did when she saw me was to cut my tongue. (1976, p. 164)

Kingston has mixed feelings about the experience. On one hand, she feels proud that her mother committed such a significant act upon her. On the other hand, she is terrified because the first thing her mother did when she saw her was to cut her tongue. Kingston is unsure whether she has one frenum or two, and she even asks other children to open their mouths so she can compare hers to theirs. This confusion and doubt illustrate the failure of her second psychological disposition of autonomy during the “Early Childhood” phase. This will evidently have an impact on her first experiences outside the family framework at the third stage of her development, the “play age”.

According to Erik Erikson, the “play age” is a stage in life when children explore their ambitions and the roles they want to take on. The challenge of this stage is to pursue worthwhile goals without being hindered by guilt or fear of punishment. Initiative, curiosity, and ambition are rooted in the ability to take risks. Guilt, on the other hand, stems from inertia caused by the fear of punishment. This is also the stage where children begin to interact with others and learn to get along with peers. During this period, they develop their oral expression and acquire foundational skills like writing and counting, which gradually give them more control over their immediate environment and the outside world. However, young Kingston fails to successfully navigate this stage due to the accumulated failures from previous stages. Even though she is expected to speak fluently in all languages once the language barrier is lifted, Kingston experiences silence in her daily life: “When I went to kindergarten and I had to speak English for the first time, I became silent... During the first silent year I spoke to no one at school, did not ask before going to the lavatory, and flunked kindergarten” (1976, p. 165). Her difficult integration into school only exacerbates her challenges. Specifically, she experiences persecution from some of her schoolmates, especially the Japanese: “Some Negro kids walked me to school and home, protecting me from the Japanese kids, who hit me and chased me and stuck gum in my ears. The Japanese kids were noisy and tough” (1976, p. 166). Combined, Kingston's personal struggles and the rejection or violence she experiences from some of her peers contribute to her inability to succeed in her early years of education. As a result, she exits this stage with no control over her personal difficulties and is unable to overcome the obstacles that the outside world presents.

Then comes the “School age” stage. According to Dominique Colin (2016), this period is a crucial phase before adolescence; it is the period of “academic and cognitive achievements such as reading, writing, logical reasoning... [Here], the

child will discover that he can be successful, just as successful as adults can and because of some of their abilities or skills, he will succeed better than many others. Therefore, with all his new achievements, the child will be able to avoid being inhabited by a feeling of inferiority⁶” (2016, p. 11). Erikson believed that this sense of inferiority is one of the major obstacles that can hamper the child's growth.

In the case of Kingston, the feeling of inferiority stems from various factors, including discrimination within her family, a lack of appreciation for her academic achievements, and a sense of not being protected by her parents. Since birth, she has faced sexual discrimination from the patriarchal and misogynist Chinese society, which does not value the existence of women. To this society where being a man is synonymous with pride and freedom and being a woman is synonymous with obedience and submission, her existence as a woman matters little. Additionally, her racial identity is not as well recognized by the American society. She has to contend with cultural and social systems that do not value her femininity or trust herself as a person. As a result, she constantly feels threatened by the possibility of being sold in China. To gain her parents' attention and encouragement, Kingston finds solace in her studies: « 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. In China there were solutions for what to do with little girls who ate up food and threw tantrums. You can't eat straight A's. » (1976, pp. 45-46)

She recognizes that her academic achievements are an area where she can excel, and this success helps her overcome the feeling of inferiority. In spite of her convincing results, she continues to be ignored by her parents. The success does not erase the discrimination and challenges she faces due to her gender and race. However, she is encouraged by some teachers:

I studied hard, got straight A's, but nobody seemed to see that I was smart and had nothing in common with this monster, this birth defect. At school there were dating and dances, but not for good Chinese girls. “You ought to develop yourself socially as well as mentally,” the American teachers, who took me aside, said. (1976, p. 196)

The protagonist in the novel is subject to both cultural and social oppression, as well as devaluation from her family and society, leading her to feel worthless. This has a profound psychological impact on her development, causing her to withdraw from social interaction. Instead of developing positive traits such as self-confidence, autonomy, and initiative, as defined by Erickson (1972, p. 15), the narrator exhibits opposite traits such as distrust, dependence, doubt, and feelings of inferiority. The negative family and social environment have made her a girl living in a state of distrust. One example of this is in a conversation with her mother towards the end of the novel, where she expresses her mistrust of stories and tales: “They have no logic. They scramble me up. You lie with stories” (1976, p. 202). This reveals how her negative experiences have impacted her ability to trust and believe in others.

⁶ Translation is mine : « des acquisitions scolaires et cognitives telles que la lecture, l'écriture, le raisonnement logique... [Ici], l'enfant va découvrir qu'il peut réussir, réussir aussi bien que les adultes et même, pour certains de ses savoir-faire ou habiletés, réussir mieux que beaucoup d'autres. C'est donc à travers toutes ses nouvelles réalisations que l'enfant va pouvoir ne pas être habité par un sentiment d'infériorité »

In addition to discrimination and a lack of appreciation for her academic achievements, the protagonist also lacks protection from her parents, leading her to mistrust the outside world. She notices the difference in treatment between herself and one of her Chinese-American classmates, whom she refers to as the “silent girl.” The silent girl's parents protect both of their daughters and keep them home from school on rainy days, unlike the protagonist's parents, who do not offer the same protection: “My younger sister was below me; we were normal ages and normally separated. The parents of the quiet girl, on the other hand, protected both daughters. When it sprinkled, they kept them home from school. The girls did not work for a living the way we did” (1976, p. 172). This unequal treatment reinforces the protagonist's sense of isolation and leads her to withdraw further into silence during her school years: “I had better not say a word, then. Don't give them ideas. Keep quiet” (1976, p. 196). These experiences of mistrust and isolation have a significant impact on the protagonist's development, as she struggles to develop positive traits and trust in others.

The protagonist in the story faces discrimination, a lack of appreciation for her academic achievements, and a sense of mistrust towards the outside world. Furthermore, her parents did not offer her the same level of protection as her Chinese-American classmate's parents, which exacerbates her feelings of isolation. This is demonstrated when the narrator compares her situation to that of the “silent girl” whom she knows: “My younger sister was below me ; we were normal ages and normally separated. The parents of the quiet girl, on the other hand, protected both daughters. When it sprinkled, they kept them home from school. The girls did not work for a living the way we did” (1976, p. 172). The “silent girl's” parents protected both their daughters and kept them home from school even when it sprinkled, unlike the narrator's parents who did not seem to offer the same level of protection. This comparison highlights the unfair treatment the narrator received from her own parents compared to her classmate's parents. As a result, the narrator isolates herself, even retiring into silence for much of her school age: “I had better not say a word, then. Don't give them ideas. Keep quiet” (1976, p. 196). The quotation demonstrates the narrator's reluctance to speak up and express herself. This silence is the result of the discrimination and lack of protection she experiences, as well as her mistrust of the outside world.

This series of failures that accumulate over time ultimately culminate in adolescence. Erik Erikson identified this period as a critical stage in a person's life where they gain access to the psychological disposition that constitutes their mental vitality, which is known as identity. During this stage, adolescents begin to give themselves elements of response to the famous question: Who am I? This question can be further broken down into subsidiary questions such as: Who do I want to be? Who do I want to become? What would I like to experience in life? What are my desires or could be my desires? What projects could I undertake? How do I envision my future, and so on?

The feeling of being someone comes from accessing new social roles, actively participating in different activities, and having a sense of belonging to a community. However, the adolescent faces the danger of role confusion during this time. This is especially true for Kingston, who struggles to position herself as a woman in both of her cultures and to interact with her peers.

In Erikson's theory of psychosocial development, the fifth stage is adolescence, where a person seeks to form a unique sense of self or identity. This process involves exploring and trying out different roles and values to understand one's place in society. The questions that Kingston asks herself reflect this developmental stage as she navigates her identity as a woman in her two cultures and explores her desires and aspirations for her future. The risk of role confusion, where a person becomes uncertain about their identity and place in society, is heightened for Kingston due to her experiences of cultural conflict and marginalization.

Role confusion in the novel arises from the denial of both the protagonist's female and sexual identity. In the book, she recalls a painful moment from her childhood when she overheard her parents or the emigrant villagers saying : " When one of my parents or the emigrant villagers said, "Feeding girls is feeding cowbirds", I would thrush on the floor and scream so hard I couldn't talk [...] I might as well have said, I'm not a girl..." (1976, p. 46). Consequently, she realizes that her family and community favor, expect, and recognize male identity, so she resolves to present herself as a man through her rebellious actions. For example, she refuses to cook and cracks dishes while washing them. When her mother calls her a "bad girl," the protagonist gloats rather than cries because she thinks, "Isn't a bad girl almost a boy?" (1976, p. 47). The narrator's desire to transform into a man thus confirms her quest for equal recognition and for acceptance and esteem by her native Chinese community.

However, the protagonist's masculine features of her identity are rejected by the outside world, namely the white American culture. To fit into this culture, she must invent feminine features that will be accepted by the dominant society. As the protagonist explains, "Normal Chinese women's voices are strong and bossy. We American-Chinese girls had to whisper to make ourselves American-feminine" (1976, p. 172). The quote illustrates the protagonist's need to adapt to the American culture by suppressing her natural voice. In order to be accepted by the dominant culture, the protagonist and her friends invent an "American-feminine speaking personality" (1976, *ibid*). This dual situation of difficulty in positioning indicates the character's fear of growing up in these two environments. It also reveals the negative psychological effects of intolerance towards the diversity of the members of the two communities to which Kingston belongs. This intolerance inevitably leads to a crisis of self-assertion or identity crisis.

This crisis emerges as the character's frustration with her inability to speak up and assert her personality. This frustration is expressed through the character of the "silent girl," who becomes the object of the protagonist's search for identity. After years of being silent and realizing the subordinate position of women in both Chinese and American cultures, the protagonist recognizes the need to take certain initiatives to reject silence and express her resentment towards her mother's actions and those of the dominant white society. This rejection comes from identifying herself with this young Chinese-American girl. Kingston physically abuses the girl in the school building at the end of the evening class. This episode is found in the chapter entitled *A Song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe* and reveals that the overprotection of the girl's parents arouses hatred in Kingston. She expresses this hatred eleven times in the novel (1976, pp 173-177). For the protagonist, personality comes from

speaking out and not from silence. As she says to the “silent girl,” “I'm trying to help you out...if you don't talk, you can't have a personality” (1976, p. 180).

By attacking the “Silent girl”, personification of the submissive Chinese woman, the narrator attacks both American and Chinese patriarchal cultures that marginalize and silence racial and ethnic minorities. Despite receiving affection from her parents, the Silent girl remains submissive and silent, just like the narrator herself. While this situation makes Kingston angry and jealous, it also motivates her to speak. Through getting to know this taciturn girl, the narrator realizes the importance of speaking up as a sign of health, normality and, above all, self-assertion : “I thought talking and not talking made the difference between sanity and insanity. Insane people were the ones who couldn't express themselves” (1976, p. 186). The narrator's fear of being seen as insane and locked away in an asylum, like the other women in her neighborhood who are unable to speak, causes her to project her own hatred of her inability to speak onto her shy classmate. This transference is an expression of her refusal to be silent and her determination to speak out against the oppressive patriarchal cultures that have silenced her and others like her.

The specific case of Kingston's character makes illustrates Erik Erikson's theory on the stages of a child's psychosocial development. According to Erikson, if the parents fail to provide the child with a secure environment and fulfill their primary needs, the child will perceive the world as untrustworthy. If he is ridiculed or punished, he will develop a sense of inferiority and may isolate himself. This protagonist's journey manifests all of these features of identity crisis when she asserts, “Those of us in the first American generation have had to figure out how the invisible world the emigrants built around our childhood fits in a solid America” (1976, p. 5).

This quote from the novel's main character suggests that she is struggling to reconcile her identity as an American with her cultural heritage as the child of immigrants. Her use of the phrase “invisible world” suggests that the culture and customs of her parents' homeland were not openly discussed or acknowledged in their household. This could have made it challenging for Kingston to understand her own identity and how it fit into American society. Erikson's theory explains that if a child does not have a secure and nurturing environment in which to develop, they may struggle to form a strong sense of identity as they grow up. Kingston's sense of confusion and isolation regarding her cultural identity is an example of how a lack of support and guidance can cause an identity crisis.

Conclusion

The purpose of this work was to examine the issues of social integration and the assumption of identity in the context of cultural in-betweenness, patriarchy and racism through literature, of which *The Woman Warrior* is the corpus. The paper highlights that the harmonious construction of an individual's identity depends on the family and social contexts in which he/she grows up. However, dysfunctional environments can be a source of identity crisis, especially during adolescence.

Primarily, the major concern of the work was to analyze critically the various forms of trauma resulting from assimilation and exclusion, which demonstrate the difficulties of social integration and cultural conflicts experienced by immigrants and their offspring. Such is the case of Chinese-American adolescents whose self-

affirmation, disrupted by the circumstances of life in the United States of America, illustrates the consciousness of a stratum of the society in crisis of identity.

To locate this identity crisis, Erik Erikson's model of psychosocial development served as a guideline. For him, the successful construction of an individual's identity depends on their ability to transition successfully through the different stages that lead up to adolescence. The novel *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts* by Maxine Hong Kingston illustrates how the central character's fundamental psychic dispositions required to build a personal identity and gradually characterize herself with a true mental vitality were not fully realized due to a dysfunctional family and social environment.

The relationship between literature and social life is evident in *The Woman Warrior*, as the novel highlights the struggles of self-assertion in the context of cultural in-betweenness and the trauma of assimilation into the dominant white American society of the 1970s and 1980s. The novel is an invitation to embrace cultural differences and accept diverse cultural backgrounds as signs of wholeness. Additionally, the research highlights the crucial role that parents and the family environment play in shaping the identity of individuals and, beyond that, the identity of nations. By understanding that everyone has his own story, desires, and needs, we can develop a more tolerant and respectful attitude towards others. This attitude can help to strengthen self-confidence and self-esteem in young people experiencing in-betweenness while growing up.

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