I was attending a pageant not too long ago when the contestant field had been narrowed down to twelve young ladies. In the final round, these women had to take turns answering questions chosen at random. One contestant, who wasfairing quite well up to this point, was asked, "What are your opinions of women who decide to have both children and a career?" She answered, "I don't think women should choose to do both. Children of career mothers do not receive enough attention and turn out to be rebellious. We need more women to stay at home and concentrate on raising a family. Thank you." Let me say that was the wrong answer to tell the judges who were looking for a twenty-first century role model who believes she doesn't have to choose between two roles, but rather may live them both successfully in harmony.

This notion of both/and vision is further discussed by Rachel Blau DuPlessis, a literary feminist scholar, who says women no longer have to make either-or decisions regarding self-identity. Moreover, she proposes that women have many different experiences that influence their complex characters. She says it is damaging to live in a world of dualism where one side has to be valorized over another (DuPlessis 132). DuPlessis' theory is in distinct opposition to what the pageant contestant believed, but it is an idea that many twentieth century novelists have explored. In fact, Maxine Hong Kingston is a great example of an author whose autobiographical novel, *The Woman Warrior*, supports DuPlessis' desire for a "both/and vision."

In her autobiography, Kingston, who is an Asian American writer, explains how she spent her childhood and adolescent years believing that she had to choose one life role over another as she struggled to form an identity. In *The Woman Warrior*, she illustrates the two dichotomies that existed in her life, which were mother/slave versus "woman warrior" and American main culture versus Chinese subculture. It isn't until the final section of the novel that Kingston fully reveals what she has learned as an adult and explains her decision not to choose one role over the other. Instead, she realizes that her identity is influenced but not determined by what she has been taught by her mother and what she has experienced herself. She discovers she can be both a mother and a "woman warrior" and live an American life influenced by a Chinese subculture. To further solidify Kingston's example of "both/and vision," it is important to take a closer look at least one of these oppositions: mother versus "woman warrior."

In the opening narrative, Kingston tells the “talk story” of “No Name Woman,” a story her mother told her at puberty to warn her of the consequences of sex before marriage. The tale is about Kingston's paternal aunt who got pregnant when her husband had been gone for years. The villagers were keeping track of her pregnancy and raided her house on the night the baby was to be born. "At first they threw mud and rocks at the house. Then they threw eggs and began slaughtering our stock," Kingston's mother remembered. "Your aunt gave birth in the pigsty that night. The next morning when I went for water, I found her and the baby plugging up the family well" (4-5). The story Kingston's mother told her about her aunt's pregnancy was meant to teach her that sex was a dirty thing not to be enjoyed. Furthermore, feminist literary scholar Sionnie Smith maintains the story also taught Kingston at a young age that the female body was created for only one reason: to be contracted to a male authority through marriage and then to
carry legitimate sons. If a woman decided to use her body to entertain strangers and not to provide sons for the line of descent, her community would undoubtedly punish her (Smith 1119).

Kingston’s mother finishes the “talk story” by telling her, “Don’t let your father know that I told you. He denies her. Now that you have started to menstruate, what happened to her could happen to you. Don’t humiliate us. You wouldn’t like to be forgotten as if you had never been born. The villagers are watchful” (5). This short paragraph reinforces the idea that Kingston is growing up in a patriarchal society that privileges men by promoting traditional gender roles. It sets up for the reader that Kingston’s mother believes women are in the position to be forgotten if they make a mistake or defy what their culture expects of them. She teaches her daughter that women should not be assertive or self-confident, but rather they should be self-effacing and submissive to the societal demands of the villagers (Tyson 85).

After telling Kingston about the story of her aunt, teaching her the responsibilities of being female, Kingston’s mother tells her the story of Fa Mu Lan, a woman avenger, in the second narrative, “White Tigers.” It is no accident that Kingston juxtaposes these two stories back to back, representing the dichotomy of mother/slave versus female warrior. The mere act of writing these stories in this sequence reveals the intensity of Kingston’s struggle throughout childhood and adolescence to resolve the conflict that these victim/heroine stories created (Smith 1118). Kingston opens up this second narrative by saying, “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” (19). However, it is at this point she begins to tell the story of Fa Mu Lan, whose character she now takes over. The narrator leaves her family to go into the mountains and receive an education from an older couple. She spends twelve years training to become a warrior, and then returns home to fight a battle against the barons who are exploiting and terrorizing the community. She does have a child during the battle, but she kept him for only a month before sending him to live with her parents-in-law -- thus signifying she could not be a mother and a warrior at the same time. When the battle ended, the narrator returned to her parents-in-law, put her warrior days behind her, and had more sons for the family lineage.

In the last section of this novel, Kingston tries to decipher the meaning behind her beliefs by articulating her interpretations of her mother’s talk stories through telling her own talk story, The Woman Warrior. Kingston realizes that she can be a different person than her mother was, she can interpret her mother’s stories in ways that make sense to her life, and she can retell those stories how she believes they should be told. Therefore, in conclusion, and in reality, Kingston was able find an identity where the roles of mother and “woman warrior” co-exist instead of existing as binary opposites. Continuing her autobiography into her adult life, Kingston became a wife and a mother, and, at the same time, a professor and respected author. Her creativity teaches readers in a unique way that a woman does not have to choose between a career and motherhood. In fact, the stories that Kingston's mother told her growing up, although conflicting, helped her to develop a strong aesthetic on which to base her writing.

Works Cited


