

STORYTELLING AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE MINORITY SELF

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Abstract

Due to their race and gender, female writers of the minority ethnic groups in the United States of America have long been victims of the dominant WASP male society and have thus been marginalized from the literary establishment. As the aftermath of the 1960s (with the special emphasis on equal rights for women and different ethnic groups) and the subsequent challenges to the literary canon (especially in the 1980s), American female writings have gained ground and secured an important place both in the literary market and the academy.

Maxine Hong Kingston, probably the best known Chinese American writer, and Leslie Marmon Silko, one of the most famous Native American writers, both have produced highly autobiographical and, at the same time, highly heterogeneous texts which contain elements of rich ethnic color. Among them, the element of storytelling (“talk-story”) or orality plays an important role in the construction of the author’s self—as a member of the minority ethnic group, as a woman, and, not the least, as a writer. This paper, adopting and “translating” the concepts of bi-culturalism, collective self, and the “author” as both augments and originator proposed by Arnold Krupat, as well as the concept of translation proposed by J. Hillis Miller, deals with the complicated relationship between storytelling and the construction of the minority self by discussing three profoundly polyphonic texts: Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts* (1976) and *China Men* (1980) as well as Silko’s *Storyteller* (1981). The result demonstrates that these two female writers both transmit what they have received from their respective cultural traditions and create something new—a “translation” which, though possibly unfaithful to the “original” cultural heritage, generates unexpected performative effects.