MAXINE HONG KINGSTON’S THE FIFTH BOOK OF PEACE:
A TESTIMONY OF PEACE

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ABSTRACT
The present paper aims at examining Kingston’s The Fifth Book of Peace as a literature of Peace, from the vantage of Kingston as a pacifist and her experimental workshop from the writing meditation, which were phenomenal in bringing out the war experiences of the veterans as testimonies of peace. It also analyses the episodic reports of the downhearted and frenzied war veterans as a trauma study by foregrounding the therapeutic effect it has upon the combatants in particular, and the world at large. Kingston, through various strategies like The Walk for Peace, Sanctuary and Communal Workshop expounds the ideology of pacifism contemplating transformation in the human family. An analysis of Kingston’s peace prepositions in the literary discourse reveal that war is not a solution and dispute and reconciliation within the “selves” of mankind would evolve them as a peaceful lot.
Maxine Hong Kingston is a highly acclaimed memoirist, who by integrating autobiographical elements with Asian myth and legend serves as a bridge between two civilizations – the Occidental and Oriental. Living with a double hyphenated identity as a Chinese-American-woman, confronting racism and sexism simultaneously, her endeavour as a literary artist was to define the identity of Chinese women and enshrine the lives of Chinese fathers in America, as Gold Mountain Heroes which she accomplishes through her exotic and myth-laden narratives *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood among Ghosts* and *China Men* respectively. Hailing from a tradition, that deemed the act of writing as an unwomanly occupation, she emerged as a feminist, breaking the gendered roles the Chinese women were commonly associated with. Her visionary narratives drew Kingston to pen wars precipitating controversy over the authenticity and cultural references in her texts.

Following the much debated first two memoirs, in 1987, Kingston published two prose collections “Hawai‘i One Summer and Through the Curtain. In 1989, Kingston published her first fiction *Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book*, which as a cultural study redefines nationalism in a multi-cultural perspective. When Kingston’s writings orient themselves under two theoretical framework ethnicity and gender, ethnicity and race with its quest for identity of the diasporas, Kingston has given a different hue to identity with its dynamic ability to transcend gender, ethnicity, race, religion and language in her multi-genre text *The Fifth Book of Peace*. In her metaphorical literary journey, she could discern the female self ‘I’ traversing through ethnic selves to reach the collective selves “we” as global citizens.

In addition to Kingston’s popularity as a feminist, ethnic nationalist, cultural activist, she has carved a niche for herself as a pacifist too. Having been born and brought up in America, cherishing the rich values and virtues to colour her life, she was deeply affected to see America misappropriating its power, misusing the positive energy to be drained off in war and its strategies like drafting and nuclear demonstrations. After her participation in fruitless anti-draft movements and nuclear protests, she left Berkely for a peaceful living in Hawai‘i, to be disillusioned soon with her realization that war was even more real, close and deep-seated in Hawai‘i. With her firm conviction that prevalence of peace and pursuit of peace is the need of the war in this war-stricken world, she decided to write a global novel and bring about an evolution at the global level by means of the language of peace. *The Fifth Book of Peace*, a sequel to *Tripmaster Monkey*, centres stages Vietnam War through fictional and non-fictional narratives set in the background of Hawai‘i. In one of her interviews, Kingston claims herself to be a political writer. “I now think that I am a very political writer in that I want to affect politics and I want to have power through the means of art. I feel I am playing for political stakes and I want to change the world through artistic pacifist means” (qtd. in Skenazy 168).

With her gaze directed at a different direction to write “a novel that uses nonviolent means to get to nonviolent ends” (qtd. in Simmons 45), Kingston originally wrote the book *The Fourth Book of Peace*. Unfortunately, the 156 page manuscript was consumed in the 1991 wildfire that raged over the Oakland hills along with the twenty five lives of Berkelians. *The Fifth Book of Peace*, in fact, is the outcome of her resolute, relentless and undaunted spirit of rewriting the lost book. Kingston told Donna Perry,

I am looking for a language of peace. I am trying to rewrite a book of peace. And so maybe that is fighting for the soul, not just of Chinese American people, but the human soul. I want the human soul to be one where people care for one another and where people cherish and nourish and value one another, and I am trying to think of ways of conflict resolution (qtd. in Skenazy 184)

Kingston did prove herself successful as a pacifist, integrating various souls of all colour, country and religion through the art of a community building workshop which becomes the pivot of her text.

This paper presents a critical outlook on the concept of pacifism and the testimonies of peace through Kingston’s *The Fifth Book of Peace*. By foregrounding anti-war messages and anti-war demonstrations, Kingston
has formulated a distinct theory of pacifism. The conception of Sanctuary and the community building act of workshops with different meditations like Writing, Walking, Eating and Hugging were brainwave out of her association with the Buddhist Thich Nhat Hanh, which Kingston uses as various strategies of peacemaking. Having lived a diasporic existence imbibing values of the dual cultures of the homeland China and host land America, she derived her precepts of peace from an integration of cultures. She carries this message to the Chinese diasporas in particular not to be browbeaten by their displaced identities and also uses it to address the world at large. The paper further examines and expounds Kingston’s pacifist propositions through the testimonies of war veterans.

The term ‘pacifism’ which generally refers to the belief that war and violence are not the means to settle disputes, though seems to be a newly inducted word coined by the French Peace Campaigner Emile Anand in the twentieth century, is a century old term since Peloponnesian war time in 404 B.C. In America, Peace Movements gained its currency with the theologian David Low Lodge in 1815. In 1860s, Peace Democrats were pejoratively addressed as “Copperheads”. (Romero) Antiwar protests and peace movements gained its momentum with various protests and organizations like The International Committee of Women for Permanent Peace, American Union against Militarism, War Resisters’ International, No More War Movement and Peace Pledge Movements. In addition to their protests against civil War and World Wars, the most incited, widespread antiwar sentiment gained its ground with loud outcries against U.S. role in Vietnam War.

The modern contemporary world is full of violence and agitated by warfare. America, despite its rich and nourishing values to be imparted to the world, played a deplorable role in the depletion of mankind with its ravaging wars. American wars with its far reaching impact on Asian Americans took the literary canon in a new direction, challenging war as a political discourse. Among popular Chinese American women writers, Kingston is a pioneer, the trailblazer to spread the message of peace to the world. Her principles of peace was not that of “conditional pacifism” which was “against war and violence in principle”, but accept that “there may be circumstances when war will be less bad than the alternative” (pacifism) nor was it “selective pacifism” which viewed war as a “matter of degree, and only oppose wars involving weapons of massive destruction – nuclear or chemical and biological weapons – either because of the uniquely devastating consequences of such weapons as ‘winnable’. (Pacifism) Kingston, in all sense, was one of ‘absolute pacifist’, for it was her firm conviction that “it is never right to take part in war, even in self-defence” (Pacificism). According to Kingston war is not a positive policy. It is “the spirit of Yin – a feeling of peace and love” which made her to protest against war in front of the White House with peace slogans “Bush says Code Red. We say Code Pink” (FBP 402) which culminated with the arrest of Kingston. She defines the objective of her writing The Fifth Book of Peace to Neila C. Seshachari. “That we can evolve past being a warring species into peaceful species so that we are not predators anymore, and that we stop being carnivorous. If only we could stop being cannibals” (qtd. in Skenazy 210).

The rationale of evolving and transforming mankind into humane human species gave Kingston the impetus to write the text. Through the four chapters Fire, Paper, Water and Earth, she has drawn a formula of pacifism. The first section is highly autobiographical in tone, describing the harrowing experiences of the Berkely fire, which gave Kingston a new insight on war. By associating the natural calamity with the malevolent hand of man, she tries to impart the message of moral purgation.

I know why this fire. God is showing us Iraq. It is wrong to kill, and refuse to look at what we’ve done. (Count the children killed, in “sanctions”: 150,000, 360,000, 750,000. “Collateral damage”. The counts go up with each new report. We killed more children than soldiers. Some of the children were soldiers.) For refusing to be conscious of the suffering we caused – the camera-eye on the bomb went out as it hit the door or roof at the center of the crosshairs – no journalists
allowed, no witnesses – we are given this sight of our city in ashes. God is teaching us, showing us this scene that is like war. (FBP 13-14)

On seeing the devastation of fire, reflected as a spectacle of carnage, Oakland Fire Captain Ray Gatchalian wanted to instruct the Americans by bringing busloads of people and children to the site. “When we, as a country, decide to go to war against somebody, this is what we are going to get. When we decide to send our military and our bombs into a country, this is what we’re deciding to do” (FBP 14).

Reawakened with a new consciousness after the disaster, Kingston reinforced her objective through the avenue of peace. She gave the burnt ashes of the book The Fourth Book of Peace, a phoenix-like life inscribing it as The Fifth Book of Peace. The second section “Water” helps Kingston to reconstruct a narrative of peace. Her mission in search of “a line, a reference, allusions, words such as “peace”, “pacific”, “ping, wo, wo ping, ping ho, ho ping (FBP 46) was successful helping her find out the “turtle books” and “Oracle bones”, and “Peace hexagram” (FBP 47). When she saw inscriptions of war and peace on the oracle bones, she found it encouraging seeing only peace hexagram and not a war hexagram engraved on the bones.

When the first two sections were non-fictional in genre, Kingston gives a fictional tone to the next section “Water” setting it against the Hawaiian island, figuring it with the familiar characters William Ah Sing and Tana De Williams and their son, the protagonist of her novel Tripmaster Monkey. Kingston stages her debate on peace and war through these characters. It is highly ironical to note, how Wittman gets closer to war, when in reality, his stay in Hawaii was supposed to be a sojourn to escape war in America. After landing up only, Wittman understood that he has reached the staging area of war with a sight of rows of coffins draped with American flags on the conveyor belt in the airport. Later, during one of his rides in Hawaii, he encountered the missile target practice of the Americans with pieces of mountain exploding and blowing apart. It came to his realization that the island was meant to be “an aircraft carrier, a launching pad, an armed satellite, and its purpose was to funnel our every destructive resource to Viet Nam” (FBP 119). Wittman serves as a mouth piece and a representative to explicate Kingston’s ideology of peace.

Kingston, in her attempt to construct the edifice of the world with the prop of peace employs different strategies for peace-making namely – The Walk for Peace, Sanctuary and Workshops. It is surprising but encouraging to note that “The Walk for Peace” constituted not only common civilians, kindred relations of war victims but soldiers, sailors and airman in uniform. Leaflets with peace messages took the tidings in the air. The message, read out as a Statement of Conscience by Buffy Perry was highly persuasive with the message of non-violence.

Above all laws, above all patriotic or nationalistic duties, is the duty to stop or destroy any force which interferes with positive human life forces… Are people going to wait until the whole earth is contaminated before they do something about it? By then it will be too late. We could work within the system to stop the annihilation of all humanity… I’ve chosen to begin a lifestyle of non-cooperation on any level with the military establishment. (FBP 196-197)

The Peace activists, after their march found their destination in Sanctuary. Kingston saw Sanctuary as a “moral and ethical stand against war” (FBP 200). The Conscientious Objectors formed a community to denounce war through the means of Sanctuary. Gene Bridges, a Minister from Berkeley’s Unitarian Universalist Association read out the ideal and rights of Sanctuary.

In its broadest contemporary meaning, Sanctuary refers to community solidarity with one of its members’ confrontation with the illegitimate authority of the state. Sanctuary breaks down the tremendous feeling of isolation that young men in our society feel when they contemplate
alternatives to... submitting to dehumanization, and to committing murder in an illegal and immoral war... Sanctuary for the first time provides a forum for GIs who oppose the war to plead their cases before the public. If they oppose the war, they no longer have to think distantly about Sweden (or Canada). They look to their local church. Moreover, the solidarity established between soldiers and draft resisters and the civilian public (i.e., church members) convincingly breaks down the popular image that the peace movement opposes individual GIs as well as the military system. (FBP 197-198)

Sanctuary, thus, a retreat in the Church retains its sanctity serving security to the peace veterans to propagate their ideals.

After defining her peace propositions through sanctuary, Kingston offers a scaffold in the form of workshop which is to serve as an antidote to the practice of violence in war. The conception of workshop was the outcome of two inspirational forces. First, it was an answer to one of her mother’s dreams. “What have you been doing to educate America? What have you done to educate the world?... Teach the nation family” (FBP 241-242). Secondly, she derived her inspiration from the Hawai’ian culture. Greatly inspired, she expressed her concern for peace and her quest to find ways to promote peace to Helena Grice. “The world knows about aloha. I want to spread the idea of ohana as well the Beloved Community, according to Martin Luther King Jr. And ho’oponopono – gathering and talking out difficulties” (113). The idea found its manifestation with the device of workshops, which is to serve as a reservoir to give vent to the residues of pent up minds of both the victimizers and the victims of war.

Kingston, who saw literature as the right avenue to remember, register and transmit the voices of the mind, prompted the war veterans to decant “war into words, and through language make sense, meaning, art of it, make something beautiful, something good” (FBP 260). The workshop provided a common platform to both the veterans of war and the veterans of peace, with its various exercises like meditations of Writing, Walking and Eating to alleviate the sorrows of war. She saw the various meditations as a healing therapy for the war veterans to overcome the post traumatic memories that hover and haunt their mind for ever. The proposition of Kingston had been pronounced boldly by one of her veterans Larry Heinemann. “When you write the pain of war, you will relieve it. You’re going to live through the pain again. You do relieve the war, the emotions, the smells. But… You can control it, put it down, pick it up. Writing is a craft of the hand” (FBP 290). She believed that the representation of trauma, with all the recollection of the events would help the war veterans to reconfigure the self and help the individuals to anchor their lives in the future. No doubt their testimonies of war would have its therapeutic effects not only on the individual selves but to the whole of mankind.

Testimony in general, implies a belief that war and violence are unjustifiable means to settle disputes. Testimonies have played a crucial role in reconstruction and rehabilitation in the post-war world. The Holocaust Memorial in Berlin with its gripping visual has recorded testimonies of the holocaust. The Shoah Foundation was set up for the survivors of the Holocaust to tell their stories of surviving Hitler’s agenda of genocide. Literary trauma studies have emerged out of two theorists Yale critic Shoshana Felman and psychoanalyst Dori Laub, who in their book Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature have discussed at length, the therapeutic significance and social relevance of testimonial writing. The book defines the trauma of the Holocaust, as an act of witnessing the unprecedented historical occurrence of an event. Their writings were Statement of Consciousness. In the present context, Kingston’s workshop with its testimonies of the veterans serves as a therapy, facilitating the combatants to overcome the anguish of war bringing in a transformation both at the conscious and subconscious level. The “Outline of Caodaism” which Kingston received from the veterans, spells out the post traumatic phase of war.
Humanity lives in sufferings. We suffer as a result of heart breaking ideological conflict; cruel wars, effete ethics. We suffer a terrible form of anguish with a mixture of inferiority complexes, moral sterility, and spiritual void. It is our duty, to seek, by all means, if not to end those sufferings, at last, to relieve them. (FBP 243)

Kingston’s writing meditation, further expounds to redefine the meaning of terms associated with war. The terms ‘deserter’, ‘conscientious objector’ generally employed in a pejorative tone, to address military personnel who eludes themselves from their martial duties, gain their positive connotation with the testimonies of the veterans. Mike Wond has no qualms or sense of remorse in calling himself a deserter when he affirmed, “I’m going to change ‘deserter’ from meaning coward to meaning ‘brave’. Remember the dolphins that were being trained to deliver explosives? Some of them escaped; they deserted from the military. Those dolphins were deserters. I’m a deserter too” (FBP 331).

The gruesome war experiences, which incited many veterans towards a voluntary disarmament, further, bring to light the military injustice during war. George Evans, the medical corpsman in the U.S. Air Force, a conscientious objector lays bare the truths behind his nation’s role in Vietnam. “It is built on graves, on bones, on promises broken and nightmares kept, on graves that howl deep in the earth, on skulls crushed with religious objects, on human skin used as rugs, on graves upon graves of graves. And we are always busy conquering ourselves” (VWVP 88).

Another defining aspect of the workshop is its illuminative nature of looking at the combatants in a different perspective. When the soldiers have no direct hand in the political strife, they become instrumental in the war confrontations, being used as weapons of power. “When you touch fire and your hand gets burned, it is not the responsibility of the hand alone. It is the responsibility of the whole person” (FBP 311). The Statements of Conscience of the victimizers bears testimony to the fact how the military training hammers their mind with a psychological conditioning, when in person they bear no hostility towards the victims of war. Believing in the transformative power of the workshop, Kingston makes it as her endeavour to bring out a psychological reconditioning that would embed both their conscious and subconscious mind with thoughts of love and compassion for each other, to be soon reflected in their deeds. Kingston illuminates this peace message to the world through the ‘lived through’ experiences of war from the peace veterans who as victimizers and victims have felt the futility of war. This pacifist ideology is reiterated by Sr. True Emptiness who said that “the energy of goodness and beauty in us can protect us. Because we are motivate by love” (FBP 375).

Kingston takes it as her mission to ring the “Bell of Mindfulness for Peace” and non-violence. As expressed by one of the veterans “We’ll sweeten the air with the bell. I’m clear …BE PEACE! Move toward the war zone, touch the people, and bear witness. If many of us, or even a few, went there, unarmed, we could stop the war, even for a moment” (FBP 307). War veteran, Joe Lamb who read out his story “Measure me” to a gathering of war veterans, discusses at length the forces behind war.

Does the species itself wage war with itself? Where are wars fought? On the earth? In the mind? In the consciousness of the culture? In the collective soul? In the theater of the revolving soul? How long does each war last? Does a war end when individuals heal? When the culture heals? (FBP 295)

The Civil War vet Powell’s insight into the evolutionary nature of human species is highly enlightening and thought-provoking. He sees “war” as a nightmare relic of our animal condition (FBP 285). He wants human minds to be honed with fine faculties of wisdom and reason.
Many of our modern thinkers have found in war the evolutionary law of natural selection, ‘the survival of the fittest’. But while injustice and cruelty stain the path of our history, I believe that man has risen in culture not by reason of his brutal nature; but because he has been emancipated from such cruelty… I believe that human evolution is the result of the exercise of human faculties – evolution by endeavor. (FBP 285-286)

Kingston does not want the political power of the world to profit out of human lives. Through her literary discourse and the memoirs of the veterans in the workshop, she articulates her stance against war formulating strategies of peace.

Through the episodic testimonies of the veterans in the workshop and Kingston’s ideology of pacifism, the paper aims at instilling the intrinsic values of the ethics of peace and non-violence. The testimonies borne out of the collective memory, with its reinvented truth about war and violence would render new insight about human values and lives. Kingston, through the meditation of writing tries to promote the language of peace. She in her epilogue affirms, “Peace lead us... A moral principle is neither relative nor conditional; it does not depend on the time, circumstance, or situation” (FBP 399). Her language of peace has been welcomed and acknowledged to be inducted as a course of education to be called Peace Education. In Hawai‘i, a Pacific Buddhist Academy is to be inaugurated. The Principal of the institution, Pieper Toyama proudly proclaims, “We’re going to develop happy, successful students who make peace. Peace education will cut across the entire academic curriculum. Coming at a time like this, it makes even more sense” (FBP 401). The teaching and message of Kingston’s peace education is, “Children, everybody, here’s what to do during war. In a time of destruction, create something. A poem. A parade. A community. A school. A vow. A moral principle. One peaceful moment” (FBP 402). The one peaceful moment would teach us the value of togetherness because religion is after all a man-made conception and the frontiers of nation are man-defined lines and the spirit of nationalism is a man imposed dogma. Sister Phuong through her epiphany professes the great truth of life. It is because “we tried to make a concept, we are separated: he is Christian, he is Buddhist, he is Islam, he is Western, he is non-Western, Vietnamese” (FBP 376). In fact, by virtue of life, we the humanity are one. Doubtless, Kingston’s present peace project, with its recollection of the past would instill a sense of “reverence for life”.

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