

Szmańko, Klara

**The trope of no name woman in American fiction and ethnography featuring Asian women**

*Brno studies in English*. 2004, vol. 30, iss. 1, pp. [189]-204

ISBN 80-210-3631-1

ISSN 1211-1791

Stable URL (handle): <https://hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/104311>

Access Date: 16. 02. 2024

Version: 20220831

Terms of use: Digital Library of the Faculty of Arts, Masaryk University provides access to digitized documents strictly for personal use, unless otherwise specified.

KLARA SZMAŃKO

## THE TROPE OF NO NAME WOMAN IN AMERICAN FICTION AND ETHNOGRAPHY FEATURING ASIAN WOMEN.

All no name women I analyze in my paper transcend boundaries.<sup>1</sup> The No Name Woman from Maxine Hong Kingston's "No Name Woman" and Mrs Tan from Margery Wolf's *Thrice Told Tale* cross cultural boundaries, whereas Ahjuhma from Chang-rae Lee's *Native Speaker* and PoPo from Kingston's *Tripmaster Monkey* traverse both cultural and geographical boundaries. The narrators of all four texts in a sense engage in a process parallel to the crossing of boundaries. Just as the no name women negotiate between various cultural norms, the narrators need to mediate between various meanings inscribed upon the four heroines. The texts discussed here illustrate the intricate process of the conflicts of meaning. In the course of their narratives Kingston, Wolf and Lee aim at naming what is unnamed. Ahjuhma, the No Name Woman and PoPo are not only figuratively but also literally nameless. Their namelessness finds its reflection in alienation from their communities. Still, each of the women is estranged from her community in a different way and to a different degree. An air of mystery hovers over the life of each protagonist. Trying to unravel the mystery, the narrators of all four texts provide the reader with different stories about their no name women. None of the narrators reduces the complexity of their lives to one simple story, but presents multiple interpretations of who they really are.

The arrangement of texts in this paper is not accidental. I have chosen to begin with Kingston's "No Name Woman" and I also end with another text, Kingston's *Tripmaster Monkey* (published in 1989). "No Name Woman" constitutes the first chapter of Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*. Yet the story originally appeared separately in the January 1975 issue of *Viva*. *The Woman Warrior* is Kingston's real autobiography, in which she tries to map her own place between the past of her Chinese ancestors and her own Chinese American present. Through the figure of the No Name Woman Kingston forges a link between the land of her ancestors and her homeland – the United States. *The Woman Warrior* was an instant hit, while *Tripmaster Monkey* met a hardly enthusiastic response from the reading public. Despite winning a broad readership, *The Woman Warrior* raised eyebrows of certain portions in the Chinese American community. Kingston's representation of Chinese Americans and her interpretation of Chinese myths sparked fierce criticism from Frank Chin, Ben Tong and other Chi-

nese American nationalists. *Tripmaster Monkey* to a great extent responds to their charges. The Kingston–Chin debate is the subject for a separate publication. I opt for a circular structure to frame my paper with two strikingly different responses to namelessness. While “No Name Woman” presents a negative response to namelessness, *Tripmaster Monkey* offers a positive one. Unlike other texts discussed here, Margery Wolf’s *Thrice Told Tale*<sup>2</sup> (published in 1992) is an ethnographic account. The study of Mrs Tan’s case becomes a springboard for far-reaching reflections on ethnography, femininity and postmodernism. Finally, Chang-rae Lee’s *Native Speaker* (published in 1995) is a fictional autobiography of second-generation Korean American Henry Park. In his narrative Park tries to undermine the invisibility of American immigrants, not only Korean Americans and other Asian Americans but also immigrants of other ethnic and racial origin. Ahjuhma – the no name woman included in his narrative – is one of many immigrant figures whom he tries to render visible. I juxtapose three fictional texts with one ethnographic account primarily because all of them offer an extensive study of the trope analyzed here. They harmonize with one another, encompassing numerous analogies. “No Name Woman”, *Tripmaster Monkey* and *Native Speaker* at some points verge on ethnography. The second chapter of *Thrice Told Tale* – “The Hot Spell” – is a short story. In the first part of my paper I am going to compare two Asian women who cross cultural boundaries: the No Name Woman and Mrs Tan, whereas in the second part I will juxtapose Ahjuhma and PoPo, women who cross cultural and geographical borders.

The name of Kingston’s *No Name Woman* is never spoken and it is “unspeakable” (Kingston 235). Members of the Chinese and Chinese American community doom the No Name Woman to namelessness to punish her for the adultery she allegedly committed. Unlike the rest of the family, the narrator is anxious to recapture the filial bond with the No Name Woman. They renounce her, wishing she had never been born. The narrator, on the other hand, would like to forge a closer relationship with the dead aunt, trying to recover her side of the story. She is desperate to see her as a member of the community, as a kindred spirit, someone she could identify with as a relative: “Unless I see her life branching into mine, she gives me no ancestral help” (230). Hoping to recreate family ties, she wants to establish some level of interaction. What matters most to the narrator is a spiritual bond with the No Name Woman, who becomes her antecedent, the antecedent of the Woman Warrior. She sees the No Name Woman as her “forerunner” (229). At some points the No Name Woman is depicted in terms of warfare imagery. She “fights” during her labour (234) and after death she needs to “fight” other ghosts for food (236). Like a woman warrior, she keeps her posture erect (231).

The narrator finds out about the existence of the No Name Woman from her Chinese American immigrant mother Brave Orchid, who tells her a cautionary tale about an aunt that became pregnant and later committed suicide by drowning herself and her child in the family well. The events described in the story do not unfold on American soil, but back in the Chinese village. Having been told the story, the narrator is forbidden to ever mention her aunt. No one in the household utters the dead aunt’s name or wants to hear it spoken. If young

Maxine wanted to ask some questions about the No Name Woman, she would have to refer to her as “father’s drowned in the well sister” (227). As a representative of the young generation, the narrator challenges her parents, “always trying to get things straight, always trying to name the unspeakable” (227). That is also what she does in the story. Writing about the No Name Woman, she breaks her silence, speaking what in her parents’ culture was unspeakable and at least partially inverting her aunt’s namelessness. Still, she is aware that “naming is only one step towards unnamings” (Minh-ha 48). Therefore she is very cautious not to inscribe the No Name Woman with one fixed meaning, but looks into various scenarios of what might have happened.

“Trying to get things straight”, Kingston considers two possible story lines. Either her aunt was raped or she fell in love. At first it is difficult for the narrator to imagine that she would risk everything for a love affair: “Women in the old China did not choose” (228). That is why at first it occurs to the narrator that her aunt must have been raped. Although she never takes upon herself to resolve definitely what happened, she devotes more place in her story to the second alternative, picturing the No Name Woman as a conscious trespasser of boundaries. If the No Name Woman is really involved in a love affair, then she flouts the rules set by the community expecting everyone to cherish tradition. As the only descendant who stays in China, the No Name Woman bears even more responsibility for nurturing tradition, which her brothers “now among the barbarians [in the United States] could fumble beyond detection” (229). The No Name Woman is physically in China, but metaphorically she also travels west. Instead of following the path of tradition, she chooses her own way: “the rare urge west had fixed upon our family, and so my aunt crossed boundaries not delineated in space” (229). The No Name Woman seems even more west-oriented than the rest of her family. Even while already in the United States the family largely preserves its traditional ways and is unwilling to forgive.

The No Name Woman breaches the customs of the community in several ways. According to Kingston, the structure of the Chinese village resembled that of the family. All villagers perceived each other as relatives and addressed each other, using various family titles like ‘aunt’ and ‘uncle.’ A young woman was expected to marry a stranger from another village. Sexual relations between members of the same community verged on incest and were considered taboo. Parents chose a partner for their daughter without consulting her and leaving her no choice but to marry the man they found. The No Name Woman also marries a man from another village, a man she has never seen. Prospective spouses do not meet each other even during the betrothal ceremony. Before the No Name Woman encounters her would-be husband, she promises life-long fidelity to him, standing beside “the best rooster – his proxy” (228). In Chinese tradition a bride left her family village and went to live in her newly-wed husband’s family, where she knew no one. Wedding ceremonies completed, a woman became the property of her husband’s family. Kingston’s No Name Woman knows her husband just one day, because shortly after the wedding he sails away for the United States never to come back in her lifetime. Having been ceded away to her hus-

band's family, the No Name Woman practically loses control over her life: "Her husband's parents could have sold her, mortgaged her, stoned her. But they had sent her back to her own mother and father" (229). The narrator wonders why they sent her back. Was she disgraced or did she fail to acclimatize, being a stranger among strangers? For the Chinese the welfare of the community reigns supreme. Individual aspirations are subordinate to the needs of the community. Rather than efface her individuality and comply with the laws of the community, the No Name Woman yields to her personal cravings. According to Kingston, the Chinese had sublimated sexualities. Instead of suppressing her desires, the No Name Woman allows them to flourish and burst to the surface. She also rises above the constraints of her gender and steps out of the place assigned to women in her society. A married woman in China was not expected to adorn herself or in any way invest in her appearance. Most married women wore plain clothes, cutting their hair short or combing it in a bun. In one of her visions the narrator imagines her aunt as exactly the opposite. To attract her lover, she secretly gazes in the mirror and works on her looks.

What incurs the condemnation of the community is not only the very act of adultery but also the fact that the No Name Woman enters a secret relationship. In the Chinese village everything was public, nothing could be private. By engaging in a secret love affair, she dares to have a private life separate from the life of the community: "Children and lovers have no singularity here, but my aunt used a separate voice, a separate attentiveness" (232). Analyzing the reaction of the community to her aunt's alleged transgression, Kingston draws our attention to concomitant circumstances. The incident involving the No Name Woman occurs at the time of drought, bad crops and hunger. Struggling with daily reality, the villagers are not inclined to forgive, let alone show sympathy. Unlike the narrator, they pass the verdict, but never take the trouble to ask what really happened.

The labour and birth scene symbolizes the magnitude of the No Name Woman's alienation and suffering. During the labour she is totally alone, having run into the open field to escape the curses of her family. Only the stars keep her company. Being enfolded by darkness from all sides, she feels lost in space. At times she seems to merge with timeless, boundless space:

The black *well* of sky and stars went out and out and out forever;  
her body and her complexity seemed to disappear. She was one of  
the stars, a bright dot in blackness, without home, without a com-  
panion, in eternal cold and silence. (234)

The "well" is a foreshadowing of her suicide death by drowning in the family well. The No Name Woman's fear and loneliness are intertwined with memories of the family and pictures of a village life. Those memories intensify her separation, prompting her to run back towards the community – to the pigsty, where she is still alone, but at least has a fence by her side – "a tribal person" (235). Enclosed with the family fence, the No Name woman becomes part of the household again even if she is on the very margins of the community. During the months of her

pregnancy the No Name Woman perceives her child as a burden, as “a foreign growth” (235). After the birth she recognizes its humanity. Like Sethe from Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, the No Name Woman kills the child to protect it, to spare it the horror of a life of derision. The child was probably a girl and in the Chinese community “there was no hope of forgiveness for girls” (235).

The No Name Woman’s suicide is the only response she gives to the community. We never see her directly respond to its charges. Drowning herself in the family well and spoiling the water, she wreaks her only revenge. The No Name Woman never speaks in the story. The narrator puts words into her mouth, imagining what she might have wished to tell other people: “They’ve hurt me too much” (234). This is a clear reproach, but even at this point she does not formulate a direct accusation, using “they” instead of “you”. King-Kok Cheung argues that the No Name Woman’s silence allows the narrator to unleash her imagination. The No Name Woman comes to the narrator in multiple visions: a woman in love, a victim of rape, a woman of easy virtue. The third option she dismisses straight away, devoting most place to the first one. The narrator would not have so many visions of her aunt if she did not remain silent.

The family’s curse haunts the No Name Woman even after death. According to Chinese beliefs, she does not enjoy the privileges of other ghosts, because no relatives worship her. The Chinese tradition of ancestor worship demands that relatives and descendants of the dead commemorate them by offering gifts of food, incense, paper suits, etc. Wiping her from their memory, the relatives see to it that she suffers exclusion in her afterlife as well. They not only deny the No Name Woman their own name on her grave, but are also careful not to identify with her even after settling in the United States. The No Name Woman’s namelessness helps them to save their own name. They are afraid that any mention of their dead relative might antagonize their neighbours who also belonged to the same community back in China. The narrator’s mother and father want her to participate in the punishment inflicted upon the No Name Woman. Her participation is two-fold. She not only inflicts it, but is also its recipient. First of all the narrator shares in her aunt’s punishment by repressing her own sexuality: “But, of course, I hexed myself also – no dates. I should have stood up, both arms waving, and shouted out across libraries, ‘Hey, you! Love me back!’” (233). Secondly she keeps the silence, never mentioning her aunt or uttering her name, the name she does not know:

In twenty years since I heard this story I have not asked for details nor said my aunt’s name; I do not know it... My aunt haunts me – her ghost drawn to me because now, after fifty years of neglect, I alone devote pages of paper to her, though not origamied into houses and clothes. (236)

In the end the narrator is the only person to identify with the No Name Woman. She has never spoken her name, but now in a sense she does through the very act of writing about her. Dedicating the story to the No Name Woman, she offers her treat to the dead aunt and is the only one to do justice to her.

Despite identifying with the No Name Woman, the narrator is ambivalent about her narrative enterprise, wondering whether her storytelling might not be misinterpreted by her aunt: "I do not think she always means me well. I am telling on her" (236). We can put this statement into a broader perspective. It is not without significance that "No Name Woman", first published separately, later became the first chapter of *The Woman Warrior*. Kingston's statement is placed strategically and it may air her doubts about the ethnographic venture she sets upon in her book. Will other members of the community read her text as 'telling on them' or as an attempt to make them more visible? Her fears proved quite prophetic.

The narrator of Wolf's *Thrice Told Tale* finds herself in a different position than Kingston. Kingston is told a tale and later recounts it, filling the gaps with her own imagination. Wolf engages in participant observation. She later takes a retrospective look, trying to disentangle the twists and turns of the events. It might seem that Kingston should be better acquainted with Chinese customs, having grown up on Chinese tales. Still she admits that as a child she was frequently puzzled by her mother's stories and became even more perplexed when her parents withheld an explanation. Wolf is no less confused when she finds herself in the Taiwanese village. However, at the moment she writes *Thrice Told Tale* she is already conversant with Chinese tradition, drawing not only on her own observations but also on extensive research devoted to shamanism. Kingston has only one informant – her mother, whereas Wolf has multiple informants, but primarily her assistant Wu Chieh. Wolf does not communicate with her no name woman – Mrs Tan, directly and does not try to initiate direct interaction. When presented with an opportunity to ask Mrs Tan a question, she stays quiet. Kingston would probably jump at such an opportunity. Both Kingston and Wolf write their ethnographies after a lapse of time. Wolf creates her *Thrice Told Tale* thirty years after the events unfolded. Kingston writes twenty years after hearing the story and some fifty years after the described events took place.

Margery Wolf's position as a white ethnographer studying the woman of color is quite problematic. As Dominika Ferens points out in *Edith and Winnifred Eaton. Chinatown Missions and Japanese Romances*, "western women experienced empowerment in working with people of color, whether as missionaries, journalists, or trained ethnographers" (60–61). At the time when Wolf participates in the events described in *Thrice Told Tale* she is not a trained ethnographer but an ethnographer's wife. Her husband temporarily away, she takes over the research only to present it in written form some thirty years later as a trained ethnographer. Time and again Wolf emphasizes the cultural gulf between herself and the people whom she studies in Taiwan: "I turned from the notes in disgust. The details might differ, but the general outlines of Mrs Tan's life might describe a third of the rural women in Taiwan... I was overwhelmed with a feeling of being very, very far from home" (23, 29). Being just a wife of an ethnographer, Wolf herself is in a somewhat subordinate position at the time when the events unfold. Studying Mrs Tan's case, she momentarily steps out of her place.

Wolf as well as Kingston are wondering what would happen to their no name women if the circumstances were different. What if the incident involving the

No Name Woman occurred at the time of fecundity, not at the time of hunger? What if Mrs Tan's status in the community was different – could she become a shaman? Finally, both Kingston and Wolf are left with a lot of unanswered questions. Yet Kingston has many more gaps to fill.

Like Kingston's No Name Woman, the protagonist of Wolf's *Thrice Told Tale* – Mrs Tan, travels across cultural borders, trying to become a shaman. Aspiring to this position, she endeavours to overcome her figurative namelessness and finally be acknowledged by other members of the community. According to Wolf, apart from being a stranger in the village, Mrs Tan is nameless because she lost her personal name at marriage. Unlike Kingston's No Name Woman, Mrs Tan is all along a stranger in her community. The No Name Woman lives in her own family village and there is no evidence that she is in any way estranged from other villagers before becoming pregnant. Quite the opposite: she is a long awaited daughter in a family for a long time dominated by male children. Kingston imagines her as “an unusually beloved, precious only daughter” (231). Mrs Tan, on the other hand, is alienated both in childhood and adult life. As a child she is given up for adoption and later works as a servant in a strange house, suffering ill-treatment – possibly a rape. In the village of Peihotien Mrs Tan and her husband are ‘temporary’, which means that they are new to the village and do not own the house in which they live. Living in the village for three years, she never manages to win other women's friendship or even acceptance. Most of them scorn her for her health problems during respective labours and pregnancies. Mrs Tan has friends only among fellow outsiders and elderly women, who respect her for her piety and industriousness. Because of her husband's ineptitude, Mrs Tan is the chief breadwinner. In the case of the No Name Woman, the whole community unites against her. It is different with Mrs Tan. The community is split over the nature of her shamanistic performances. Some initially believe that she really is a shaman and a god speaks through her. Others assume she is possessed by a ghost. Still others dismiss her straightaway as crazy. In the case of the No Name Woman, members of the community reach a verdict without giving a second thought. Mrs Tan's fellow villagers appear hesitant at the beginning, withholding final judgement. It is not without significance that the events described in “No Name Woman” unfold in the 1920s, whereas those depicted in *Thrice Told Tale* take place in the 1960s.

Unlike the No Name Woman, Mrs Tan speaks out. She is quiet only up to a point. The No Name Woman never confronts the community directly, whereas Mrs Tan openly throws all her grievances in the faces of her neighbours. “Other people bully me”, she repeats several times (63). Uttering prophecies about other members of the community, she at least partially switches roles and claims the power to define those by whom she has been defined so far. Mrs Tan yearns for the acceptance and respect of other villagers: “She wants to be like everyone else... She wants her neighbours to treat her with respect and to be able to take care of her kids” (44). Not being able to secure people's respect as an ordinary woman, as a “shy, quiet woman who kept to herself” (20), she tries to win people's esteem as a shaman. Her adventure with shamanism is preceded by a pos-



sible suicide attempt. Mrs Tan jumps into the rice paddy, mistaking it for the river, a traditional site for suicides, especially for Taiwanese women. Against denials of her native assistant Wu Chieh, Wolf speculates that Mrs Tan may have indeed tried to commit suicide, having failed to find her place in the village of Peihotien: "Suicide (often by drowning) is a solution for many (younger) Chinese women who have trouble creating a new self in a strange place" (115).

Trying to become a shaman, Mrs Tan not only hopes to defy her status as an outsider but also may wish to surmount gender barriers. Unlike some other women in her village, she suffers difficult labours and is always left ill for several weeks after the birth of each child. As a woman she needs to behave in a strictly prescribed fashion. During the shamanistic performances she assumes an arrogant male posture, staggers "like a figure in the Chinese opera", flailing her arms about and shouting boldly in a hoarse voice (38). Shamanism allows her to disassociate herself from the role she has to play as a woman, offering a brief respite from the constraints thrust upon her by the community. Wolf emphasizes that "Chinese women are considered only adjunct members of their husbands' families and temporary members of their natal families" (111). Being a shaman, Mrs Tan would no longer be in the wings of the community, but in the centre, becoming something of an authority on the daily problems of local villagers.

Ironically, all the aspects of Mrs Tan's life which she would like to neutralize through shamanism prevent her from becoming a shaman. On the surface, she has all the attributes of a shaman: humble origins, virtual illiteracy, sincerity, honesty, and signs of communion with a god. However, Mrs Tan's gender is a detracting factor. A shaman displays behaviour considered inappropriate for a woman. Her marginal position in her community also works against her. Being an outsider, she does not inspire enough trust among villagers. Wolf draws our attention to the fact that neither Mrs Tan nor her husband has any male relatives, which is a major impediment (111). For other villagers Mrs Tan is not only uprooted from their community but also rootless. At this point we can again discern certain parallels between Mrs Tan and the No Name Woman. The No Name Woman has male relatives, yet at the time when the community turns against her, all of them are absent from the household, leaving the family vulnerable and unprotected. One might wonder whether she would not escape the harsh punishment if her male relatives were around.

I would like to finish my analysis of "No Name Woman" and *Thrice Told Tale* by identifying further points of convergence and divergence. A similar climate of customs and beliefs permeates both texts for example Kingston as well as Wolf touch upon the belief that the ghosts of the drowned wait to pull someone in their place (Kingston 236, Wolf 24). The customs involved in the Chinese marriage receive scrutiny in both texts too; in particular the situation of a bride comes to the foreground. The No Name Woman is literally nameless, while Mrs Tan grapples mainly with figurative namelessness. Mrs Tan really exists, while the No Name Woman could just as well be a figure out of a cautionary tale. Both Kingston and Wolf provide us with multiple perspectives of the events, although *Thrice Told Tale* shows a greater degree of polyphony.

In “No Name Woman” virtually all perspectives emerge from the narrator. In *Thrice Told Tale* we can hear numerous voices – particularly in the second chapter “The Hot Spell” and in the fieldnotes. Despite varying degrees of polyphony, both authors manage to preserve contested meanings. It is essential to notice that Kingston writes her ethnography in the 1970s, while Wolf writes most of *Thrice Told Tale* in the 1990s and by that time the views on ethnography had undergone substantial changes.

Unlike the No Name Woman and Mrs Tan, Ahjuhma from Lee’s *Native Speaker* and PoPo from Kingston’s *Tripmaster Monkey*, cross both cultural and geographical boundaries. Finding themselves in the strange land – the United States, Ahjuhma and PoPo negotiate cultural differences, mapping out their own spaces within the larger space of the foreign environment. Still, each of them adopts a different attitude to their old and new countries. They also function in different ways in the space of their households, encountering a different reception from members of their most immediate environment. Both Ahjuhma and PoPo are shrouded in mystery. For most people they are blanks to be filled with meaning. The reader can see them through the eyes of various speakers who are usually anxious to define them, to slot them into just one category. The narrators of *Native Speaker* and *Tripmaster Monkey* assume a very different approach to the two characters. Yet both at least partially undermine their cipher-like status, moving closer to lifting the veil of mystery.

The no name woman from *Native Speaker* – Ahjuhma, is called many names: “total alien”, “zombie”, “an abandoned girl”, “mystery”, “Aunt Scallion”. For most of the time she appears under the name Ahjuhma, which is the customary address to an unrelated Korean woman, and in translation to English means ‘ma’am’ or ‘aunt’. We never become acquainted with her real name and the narrator Henry Park does not know it either. People in Korea are identified mainly through family and professional relations to each other, not through their names: “Americans live on a first-name basis [...] there weren’t moments in our language – the rigorous, regimental one of family and servants – when the woman’s name could have naturally come out” (69). He never hears his parents speak each other’s names either. In Korean the name is something precious. It is not used carelessly or at random. The name is spoken only at moments of profound significance. Henry imagines that Ahjuhma and his father speak each other’s names just before her death. Giving all these extenuating circumstances, Henry admits that the term “Ahjuhma [...] bore much less deference in [their] context” (69). For twenty years Ahjuhma lived with Henry and his father, practically running the whole household. Henry’s explanation of the Korean naming system does not change the fact that he never really cared to know what Ahjuhma’s real name was. To him she has always been a mystery with uncertain origins and hazy past. To a certain extent her life is indeed filled with an air of mystery. In his text he only partly manages to disentangle the mystery.

Ahjuhma’s relation to her old land is uncertain. We never find out why she left Korea to be a housekeeper in a strange house in the land of strangers. The fact that Ahjuhma wants to be buried in Korea indicates that for some reason she

had to emigrate. Henry tries to envision her past: "I imagined that something deeply horrible had happened to her when she was young, some nameless pain, something brutal, that a malicious man had taught her fear and sadness and she had had to leave her life and family because of it" (65). Henry's white American wife has her own theory why Ahjuhma left Korea. For her she is not a mystery, but "an abandoned girl" (73). Abandoned or not, she seems to have some relatives in Korea. Henry never sees her call them, but believes that she sends them money. After Ahjuhma's death his father sends her ashes back to Korea – a "gift to her grieving blood" (81). Ahjuhma's relation to her new land the United States is problematic as well. She spends most of her time in the household, hardly ever venturing outside. She goes out alone only on her day off. Other than that someone always drives her to go shopping. One day Henry secretly follows Ahjuhma. Watching her, he resembles an ethnographer, who exercises the privilege of "looking without being seen" (Ferens 100). He sees her walk several miles into the closest town, buy a glossy teen magazine and a red popsicle. Speaking no English, she just flips the pages and looks at the pictures. Before starting back for home, she peers into store windows. On another occasion Henry sees Ahjuhma watch soap operas, but she always turns them off after several minutes, which is indicative of her attitude towards the American world. On the one hand, she seems to seek contact with it. On the other hand, she is repelled by it, never trying to establish any communication with Americans. The linguistic barrier does not seem to be the cause. When Henry's wife approaches her, she bluntly says: "There is nothing for your American wife and me to talk about" (71). They represent two different worlds and Ahjuhma apparently believes that the gap between them is unbridgeable. Ahjuhma's disenchantment with the American world is also mirrored by her disapproval of Henry's interracial marriage and his biracial son. Henry's "tall, talkative friends" make her nervous (65). It never occurs to Henry that Ahjuhma may wrestle with solitude, living in isolation from the outside world and being confined to their household. Only his wife notices that she must be lonely.

Despite being alienated from the American world, Ahjuhma is not a 'total alien', as Henry's friend declares. She is fairly well ensconced in Parks' household, although her status within Parks' family appears quite ambivalent. Being responsible for running the whole house, she enjoys considerable sway in the household. Henry's statement: "she was the one who really moved us from the old house, she organized and ran the new one in a fashion that suited her" (65) might indicate that Ahjuhma almost reigns over the house. However, several sentences later, the scope of her influence considerably dwindles, when Henry comes up with a somewhat delimiting statement, claiming that the kitchen and pantry "constituted the sphere of her influence" (65). Ahjuhma really reigns supreme in the kitchen. Unless someone eats, they are not supposed to be there or rummage in any cabinets: "I was to ask her for something I wanted, even if it was in the refrigerator, and then she would get it for me" (65). Ahjuhma creates her own space in the household and guards it cautiously, barring everyone else. Her behaviour towards Henry's wife may indicate that she sees her as a threat to

her own status, fearing lest she take her place. In the above quoted passage Henry may seem a little cramped by Ahjuhma, but this is not quite the case. It might appear that after living for twenty years in the house, Ahjuhma is like a member of the family. Still, she is not entirely secure there. She certainly is not a member of Henry's wedding. It takes a small incident with Henry's wife to prompt Henry to threaten Ahjuhma with eviction: "I scolded her then, telling her she couldn't speak to my wife that way if she wanted to keep living in our house" (71). "Our" house suggests that it is nonetheless not her house, at least not according to Henry. Instead of protesting or berating Henry, who is by many years her junior, she bows subserviently before him. She realizes that her position in the house is first of all that of a servant. Ahjuhma knows her place and clings to it, unwilling to make any pretensions. Putting on the apron which belonged to Henry's mother, she might seem to pretend to the role of a housewife. However, the significance of that event is offset by the fact that she carefully dusts the photographs of Henry's mother the first thing every morning, as if acknowledging her indisputable superiority. Ahjuhma's anxiety about keeping her place may impinge on her behaviour in the household.

When in Henry's presence, she is reserved and unapproachable. Being very concrete, down to earth and sparse with words, Ahjuhma never tries to befriend Henry. Her businesslike nature may stem from her Korean upbringing, which values silence and emotional reticence. As Henry points out, "We were raised to speak quietly and little" (182). Ahjuhma tries to efface herself as much as possible: "when she wasn't cleaning or cooking or folding clothes she was barely present" (65). Still we get two other snapshots of Ahjuhma. She drops her reserve when she thinks that she is alone with Henry's father. Gardening together with him, she behaves naturally. Another close-up of Ahjuhma comes when she carries a cup of tea to the bedroom of Henry's father. Her femininity, usually concealed is suddenly revealed in this scene: "Her hair was down and she wore a white cotton shift and in the weak glow of the hallway night-light her skin looked almost smooth. I was surprised by the pretty shape of her face" (79). It is essential to distinguish between Henry's lukewarm relationship with Ahjuhma and his father's attitude towards Ahjuhma. There may actually be some intimacy between the two of them. Unlike Henry, his father is crushed by her death.

Ahjuhma is nameless not only within the narrative, but also on the textual level itself. Henry's attitude to Ahjuhma inevitably has an impact on the way he presents her. It is his wife Lelia that spurs him to once again take a closer look and perhaps uncover part of the mystery that she has been to him so far. Lelia is appalled by his ingratitude to Ahjuhma and his lack of attachment to her. "I still remember certain things about the woman", says Henry as if trying to deflect his wife's charges and atone for his insensitivity. Yet the very way he speaks about her ("the woman") belies his very insensitivity. Furthermore he remembers first of all what she did, not who she was:

she wore white rubber Korean slippers that were shaped exactly like miniature canoes. She had bad teeth that plagued her [...] She balled up her hair and held it with a wooden chopstick. She pre-

pared fish and soup every night; meat or pork every other; at least four kinds of namool, prepared vegetables, and then always something fried. (78)

Most of the time Henry does not refer to her as Ahjuhma, but simply as “the woman”, “she”, or “houselady”. Even in the passage preceding the scene of her death, he dispassionately calls her “the woman” and “my father’s housekeeper” (80). Perhaps if Henry displayed more empathy, he would be left with fewer unanswered questions about Ahjuhma.

PoPo from Kingston’s *Tripmaster Monkey* exists within similar spaces as Ahjuhma, but moves within them in a different way. As in the case of all no name women discussed here, the question arises who she really is. Speculations about her origin abound. Is she Chinese American or Japanese American? Is she ‘an illegal alien’ or a legal citizen? Is she related to the Ah Sings – the people with whom she lives in the United States? If yes, then what might be the level of her relation? Might she be the other wife of Mr Ah Sing? If PoPo really is his other wife, then her story bears some reminiscence to the story of Tin-A, the protagonist of Edith Eaton’s tale (Ferens 91). There is a suspicion that PoPo is most probably a Japanese American passing for Chinese American, because she incorporates a lot of Japanese expressions into her speech. If PoPo really passes for Chinese American, then, unlike Ahjuhma, she crosses not only geographical and cultural borders, but also ethnic boundaries. But then it is far from certain whether PoPo comes from either Japan or China. She may as well come from some other place: “She wore October opals at the top tips of her ears, perhaps a fashion of a country nobody else knows about or comes from. Perhaps her family sold her, but earmarked her to find her again [...] She spoke a language of her own, or she was holding on to a language that was once spoken somewhere” (266, 191). Statements like these add to the air of mystery around her. PoPo probably crosses more geographical boundaries than Ahjuhma. We are told that “she’s lived for a long time and in many places” (268). Hence it is difficult to identify her with just one place. PoPo is assimilated in the United States to a greater extent than Ahjuhma, who speaks practically no English at all and seems to look down on the American world. It is difficult to state unequivocally what PoPo’s attitude to the American world is, but she can communicate in English. Although she is not quite fluent, she makes a conscious effort to learn it, listening to “Let’s Learn English” records.

PoPo holds a different place in the Ah Sings’ household than Ahjuhma in the Parks’ house. Ahjuhma is introduced to the household by Henry’s father, while PoPo chooses the Ah Sings’ house, claiming to be their relative. Ahjuhma patiently waits in front of the doorway until Henry shows her in. PoPo makes a dramatic entrance: “The strange old lady pulled her apron to her back, a cape, and hung a twenty-four-carat gold medallion to her front, a breastplate, and belted herself with a twenty-four-carat gold buckle shield. Waving fans of dollar bills, she danced whirlygiggly the way they danced where she came from. They couldn’t very well turn her away” (193). PoPo dances or rather buys her way

into the household. Impressed by her gold medallion and fans of dollar bills, the Ah Sings admit her out of mercenary motives, rather than mercy or reverence for the ties of kinship. Ahjuhma enjoys much more leeway in the household than PoPo, who is confined to her own room and is not invited to the front room. All along PoPo earns her own living, running the theatre wardrobe, mending costumes, ironing and “sleeping in dressing rooms as dark-night security watch-woman” (194). When the Ah Sings no longer need her, they dump her. By contrast, Ahjuhma has a permanent place in Parks’ household and is well treated by Henry’s father, with whom she may have a closer relationship. PoPo’s place in Ah Sings’ house is temporary and Mrs Ah Sing barely tolerates her. Like Ahjuhma, PoPo is called different names: “charwoman”, “strange old lady”, “old body”. Lelia calls Ahjuhma “an abandoned girl”, while PoPo calls herself “an abandoned grandma” (263).

Unlike Ahjuhma, PoPo is shrewd and resourceful. Ahjuhma functions mainly within the household, whereas PoPo ventures to a greater extent outside. We can see PoPo boldly crossing the busy street of San Francisco without stopping at the red light. Yet PoPo does not live in a predominantly white district, as Ahjuhma does, but in Chinatown. Ahjuhma effaces herself as much as possible: “she was barely present” (65). PoPo enjoys basking in the spotlight. She claims to have performed on the London stage, where she played a princess with eighty seven fearies. Now, in her old age, she wants to play such a princess again. PoPo not only behaves differently, but also looks different. Ahjuhma usually wears sweat-pants and old blouses. She dresses up only on the day of Henry’s graduation from high school. Ahjuhma allows Henry’s father to pick out clothes for her. PoPo, on the other hand, is a flamboyant dresser, consciously investing in her appearance. Her looks mirror her effusiveness. She has “geisha style coils” (263) and “Debbie Reynolds’ eyelids” (266). She wears Malay dresses which reveal her tanned shoulders. To show off her legs, Po Po goes out without a cane.

Ahjuhma stays quiet most of the time, speaking only when necessary. PoPo is an avid storyteller, spinning a story whenever possible: “I repeat myself but not because I forget that I’ve told a story already. I know I told it before. I tell a thing over again because I like going through it again” (265). PoPo not only tells stories, but tells at least part of her own story as well. We never hear Ahjuhma speak about herself, while we are treated to the long narrative of PoPo’s misfortunes, following her expulsion from Ah Sings’ household. After being scolded by Henry, Ahjuhma silently bows. Having been abandoned by Ah Sings, PoPo vehemently protests, complaining about their heartlessness: “I’m a perfectly good grandma and they dumped me. Left me like an extra cat or dog that’s cute no more” (265). PoPo’s version of the events is juxtaposed with that of Mrs Ah Sing and Mr Ah Sing. Each story is different. Yet the reader can glean that PoPo was really abandoned. That she might have embellished her story is another matter.

Unlike Ahjuhma’s story, PoPo’s story unfolds in terms of a fairy tale convention. No matter what her relation to Henry’s father, Ahjuhma is ultimately a housekeeper. There is no place for a traditional, overexploited happy ending in her story – marriage. Henry is afraid that his father may marry Ahjuhma, but that

never happens. PoPo's story proceeds just like a fairytale. She is abandoned in the woods of the Sierra Mountains. It is getting dark, she is alone, sitting by the side of the hidden road and hopelessly weeping. Suddenly out of the darkness there emerges prince charming driving his car to rescue her. They immediately get married in Reno, a traditional site for marriages in the United States, and live happily ever after. "My love story is the talk of Chinatown", she proudly announces to Wittman (266). There is foreshadowing of such an ending earlier in the novel when Wittman is on the quest for his lost grandma: "Where are you, PoPo? Did you walk into the mountains and valleys, and fall asleep behind a tree, or accept a ride with a stranger?" (209). Like a figure out of a fairytale, PoPo always prevails whatever the circumstances.

She may be an abandoned grandma and may have played a princess, but PoPo also has another side. In *King Solomon's Mines* she played a witch. It is not sheer luck that helps her out of adverse circumstances. PoPo's resourcefulness is all too apparent. After being miraculously rescued and marrying Lincoln Fong, she helps him collect rent from his tenants and protects him from greedy relatives.

Wittman's affection for PoPo contrasts sharply with Henry's dispassionate attitude to Ahjuhma. Unlike Henry, Wittman is not the narrator of *Tripmaster Monkey*, which is told in the third person. However, parts of the narration devoted to PoPo are usually focused through his point of view. While Henry threatens to turn Ahjuhma out, Wittman invites PoPo to live with him. Henry winces at the suggestion that Ahjuhma practically raised him, whereas Wittman emphasizes that PoPo participated in his upbringing. Wittman's affection for PoPo stands in sharp opposition to his parents' bellicose relationship with her. He sees her as "a respectable member of his family" (190). Despite his attachment to PoPo, Wittman, like Henry, does not know her real name. PoPo is just a euphemism standing for grandma. However, when asked what her name is, he does not admit his ignorance, but quickly lends her his own name, christening her PoPo Ah Sing. The differences in Wittman's and Henry's approach to PoPo and Ahjuhma may stem from the fact that both women assume a different attitude to them. Hiding behind the shield of reserve and detachment, Ahjuhma does not try to win Henry's endearment. PoPo fits into the role of a grandma, lavishing care and affection on Wittman.

The end of this paper takes me back to the beginning. I begin with Kingston and end with Kingston. The first text I analyze – "No Name Woman" – appeared at the very beginning of Kingston's literary career, while *Tripmaster Monkey* is the last one she has written so far. As I hinted at the very outset, both offer a strikingly different response to namelessness. The No Name Woman transcends the boundaries of her community, but she does not manage to transcend her namelessness, at least not in her lifetime. She overcomes it only after death, through Kingston's agency. The other protagonist – PoPo – manages to invert a significant portion of her namelessness on her own. Turning her stigma into an asset, she refuses to give in to her namelessness and shows how it can be used constructively. We can put these two different responses to namelessness into the broader context of Asian American literature. The ending has always been a problematic issue for Asian American authors (Ferens 63). Rather than produce a sympathetic response, the

tragic ending frequently helped to assuage white people's fears, infusing them with hope that Asians would die out. The upbeat ending was often read as a sign of successful assimilation into American society, camouflaging racial injustice and discrimination. Kingston is fully aware of the controversy. In *Tripmaster Monkey* she ironically reflects on the problematic choice facing Asian American authors. "All we do in movies is die" (323), says Wittman. PoPo's happy ending is mirrored by a happy ending to the whole novel – an impromptu staged wedding between Wittman and Tana. However, this particular happy ending is not a replication of other happy endings but their parody. Kingston herself crosses boundaries. Instead of simply reproducing literary conventions, she reinvents and reinterprets them, taking an innovative approach to her fiction and storytelling.

The stories of the no name women discussed here show that boundary crossing is never just one single step, but an ongoing process, involving travelling back and forth rather than moving forward in a straight line. Although unassisted by the community in their attempt to cross boundaries, the no name women never really turn away from the community or leave it behind. They oscillate between their own destination and the communal ground. At the end of the story the No Name Woman runs back to the family yard. Ahjuhma is buried in her ancestral land – Korea. Mrs Tan crosses the cultural boundaries in an effort to be recognized as a legitimate member of the community. Whoever PoPo is, she never loses any of her previous selves, incorporating all of them into her identity. The namelessness of the four heroines functions against the background of the multiple names they are called. Most of those names are merely misnomers, hardly doing justice to the women in question. Their namelessness is one final boundary they need to cross and the four texts to a great extent help them in this task.

### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Acknowledgment: I thank Dr Dominika Ferens for her priceless insight.
- <sup>2</sup> Margery Wolf's ethnography *Thrice Told Tale* comprises four chapters. In the first chapter "Ruminations with a View(point)", Margery Wolf muses about her ethnographic enterprise, reflecting on the changes that took place in ethnographic writing between the 1960s and the 1990s. The second chapter "The Hot Spell" is a short story woven from the events that are the main thread of her ethnography. Unlike the rest of *Thrice Told Tale*, "The Hot Spell" was written during Wolf's stay in Taiwan in the 1960s. In the third chapter Wolf provides the reader with the fieldnotes compiled during the collection of data. Finally, the last chapter "The Woman Who Didn't Become a Shaman" constitutes a closure, in which Wolf offers her own reading of the events. Each chapter makes for a separate telling, helping the author to put the events into a broader perspective. As Edward Bruner underscores in "The Ethnographic Self and the Personal Self", "each telling, although based on the previous telling, is different" (17). These differences are noticeable in the respective chapters of *Thrice Told Tale*. Thanks to them Wolf can preserve contested meanings and create a composite picture.



**Works Cited**

- Bruner, Edward (1996). "The Ethnographic Self and the Personal Self". *Anthropology and Literature*. Ed. Paul Benson. Chicago: U of Illinois P, 1996.
- Cheung, King-Kok (1993). *Articulate Silences. Hisaye Yamamoto, Maxine Hong Kingston, Joy Kogawa*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1993.
- Ferens, Dominika (2002). *Edith and Winnifred Eaton. Chinatown Missions and Japanese Romances*. Urbana: U of Illinois P, 2002.
- Kingston, Maxine Hong (1991). "No Name Woman". *Braided Lives. An Anthropology of Multicultural American Writing*. Ed. Jenny Keyser. St. Paul (Minnesota): Minnesota Humanities Commission, 1991.
- Kingston, Maxine Hong (1989). *Tripmaster Monkey*. New York: Vintage, 1989.
- Lee, Chang-rae (1995). *Native Speaker*. New York: Riverhead, 1995.
- Minh-ha, Trinh T. (1989). *Woman, Native, Other: Writing, Postcoloniality, and Feminism*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1989.
- Wolf, Margery (1992). *Thrice Told Tale*. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1992.