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"THE WARRIOR WOMAN"

HOW, WHEN, AND WHY WOMEN BECOME WARRIORS

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If there were ever a "woman warrior," it would be Malala Yousafzai. In 2012, 15 year old Malala was on a school bus when she was shot in the head by a member of the Taliban. The Taliban tried to have her killed for the work she had done towards advancing women's rights ("Malala's Story"). Malala survived the attack and has since been very vocal about gender equality. About a year after the attack, Malala addressed the United Nations, saying "We realize the importance of light when we see darkness. We realize the importance of our voice when we are silenced" (Vaidyanathan). The would-be assassin's bullet could not silence her voice and today, her words still ring true. The same spirit that makes her a warrior is exemplified by the women highlighted in this paper, each of whom fights oppression in her way. Their approaches to "fighting" manifest in several ways—physically, socially, psychologically, and culturally—as do their situational contexts which create their warrior statuses.

The first "warrior woman" who fights against the "darkness" is the character Imperator Furiosa, from the 2015 film *Mad Max: Fury Road*. Furiosa is a one-armed woman who lives in a post-apocalyptic world dominated by a man known as Immortan Joe. Before the apocalypse, he was an officer in the military, but he has since become a warlord. After the apocalypse, water resources become scarce, but Immortan Joe, having access to a water source, becomes the leader of this society. He resides in The Citadel, which is built on top of a great aquifer. He uses this access to water as a means to control the people. Furiosa is a soldier in his army. His army consists of a bunch of fanatical men known as "the War Boys." When children arrive at The Citadel, they receive new names and become known as "War Pups." These "War Pups" are then indoctrinated into a cult of sorts, which worships mechanical objects. If "War Pups" survive to adulthood, they become "War Boys." Actress Charlize Theron revealed Furiosa's backstory, in which she says "We talked about backstory, about how she ended up with no arm and that she was discarded. She couldn't breed, and that was all that she was good for. She was stolen from this

place, this green place that she's trying to go back to. But she was kind of embedded in [the Citadel] for one thing, and when she couldn't deliver on that one thing, she was discarded—and she didn't die. And instead… she hid out with those war pups in the world of mechanics, and they almost forgot she was a woman because she grew up like them" (Sperling). Furiosa's survival in a male dominated society is her first act of defiance. Life for women in The Citadel is depicted as being rather dismal. They are either Immortan Joe's sex slaves, known as "wives," or they are hooked up to machines and used to produce milk. The film begins with Immortan Joe tasking Furiosa with retrieving gasoline. Furiosa heads out in an armored vehicle, known as a "war rig." However, unbeknownst to Immortan Joe, she has managed to smuggle his 5 wives into the "war rig." Her plan is to help them escape enslavement and start anew in "The Green Place," the land Furiosa was taken from as a child. Along the way, she encounters Max Rokatansky, a sort of "road warrior." Furiosa and Max work together to reach "The Green Place." Furiosa's resistance to the patriarchal society to which she belongs manifests as physical resistance. Immortan Joe sends groups of "War Boys" to reclaim the "wives." Furiosa and Max have to fight to fight them off. When they finally reach "The Green Place," they realize that it has been destroyed. It appears as if Furiosa has lost her battle to free herself from patriarchal rule and return to her home. However, she is reunited with the Vuvalini, a clan of women to which she used to belong. She sought "The Green Place" because it was idyllic and full of life, but she discovers that true life is found in the companionship of her female comrades.

While Furiosa engages in physical resistance, the second "warrior woman's" resistance is demonstrated in her rejection of an oppressive society during and after the Islamic Revolution. In Marjane Satrapi's autobiographical graphic novel, *Persepolis*, young Marjane is introduced as a headstrong, radical, and fiercely independent girl, growing up in Iran. At the age of six she decides she wants to be a prophet, so she can stand up to social injustice. Satrapi writes "I wanted

to be justice, love, and the wrath of God all in one" (Satrapi, 9). She was at an age when other children play with toys or have imaginary friends. Yet, there is Marjane, having an imaginary dialogue with God, about how she is going to become a prophet and battle injustice. In 1980, when Marjane is ten years old, the "Cultural Revolution" begins. It becomes mandatory for all women to wear a veil, because it is said that "Women's hair emanates rays that excite men. That's why women should cover their hair!" Marjane's mother says her "If anyone ever asks you what you do during the day, say you pray" (Satrapi, 75). In schools, the girls and boys are now taught in separate classrooms. The institution of these measures is referred to as the "Cultural Revolution." Demonstrations for and against the revolution began. Marjane's mother goes to a demonstration to protest the veil. She is photographed while there and soon after dyes her hair to conceal her identity. She is afraid that she will become a target of revolutionaries. Satrapi writes "My parents demonstrated every day. Things started to degenerate. The army shot at them and they threw stones at the army. After marching and throwing stones all day, by evening they had aches all over, even in their heads" (Satrapi, 48). Marjane's father also took photographs at the demonstrations, though it was forbidden to do so. In time, Marjane wants to participate too. She begs her parents to let her go to the demonstrations, but fearing for her safety they refuse. She decides to go anyway. She goes to a demonstration with their maid, Mehri, and they demonstrate all day. "We had demonstrated on the very day we shouldn't have: on 'Black Friday.' That day there were so many killed in one of the neighborhoods that a rumor spread that Israeli soldiers were responsible for the slaughter" (Satrapi, 38). The situation in Iran becomes very dangerous. Marjane's uncle, with whom she was very close, is executed as a spy. Shortly after, the Iran-Iraq War begins. Marjane begins to rebel against the society created by the Islamic regime. "In 1984, I was fourteen and a rebel. Nothing scared me anymore" (Satrapi, 143). Marjane starts to defy school officials. One of her teachers is trying to promote the new regime in the classroom. She

says “Since the Islamic Republic was founded, we no longer have political prisoners.” Marjane replies “My uncle was imprisoned by the Shah’s regime, but it was the Islamic Regime that ordered his execution. You say that we don’t have political prisoners anymore, but we’ve gone from 3,000 prisoners under the Shah to 300,000 under your regime” (Satrapi, 144). After this incident, her parents fear for her safety. They know that she is the kind of person who will not stop speaking her mind, but they also understand that she could be killed as a consequence. They decide to send her to school in Vienna, Austria. While in Austria, Marjane once again rebels against her society. She began smoking and dealing marijuana. “It is haram [religiously forbidden] to use narcotics in any way because it results in considerable adverse effects in terms of personal health and social cost. By the same token, it is haram to deal in narcotics in any way, i.e., carrying, transporting, storing, selling, buying, etc.” (“Why Islam Prohibits the Use of Recreational Marijuana”). For a while, she resides in a communal apartment with eight men, all of whom are homosexual. “Twenty-six articles of Iranian law deal with homosexuality, outlining punishment for various same-sex acts. This can range from imprisonment and lashings to execution” (Hilleary). She was also having premarital sex, which was forbidden under Islamic rule at that time. “In general, premarital sex and intimate relationships are prohibited. However, this rule is often applied to girls rather than boys…” (Daniels). Satrapi writes about a conversation she had with some old friends upon her return to Iran (after spending four years living in Austria). Her friends ask if she had sex while she was in school there. Marjane replies that she has had several sexual encounters. One of her friends asks “So, what’s the difference between you and a whore?” (Satrapi, 270). While in Austria, Marjane lived a lifestyle that quite possibly could have gotten her killed in Iran. Not long after moving back to Iran, Marjane decides she has to leave. She expresses her frustration with society to one of her friends. She says “If a guy kills ten women in the presence of fifteen others, no one can condemn him because in a murder case, we women, we

can't even testify! He's also the one who has the right to divorce and even if he gives it to you, he nonetheless has custody of the children! I heard a religious man justify this law by saying that man was the grain and woman, the earth in which the grain grew, therefore the child naturally belonged to his father! Do you realize?? I can't take it anymore. I want to leave this country!" (Satrapi, 337). In one more act of rebellion, she leaves Iran for good. Her response to the restrictions placed on her gender and the oppression of the Islamic regime was to defy the societal "norms" of the time. In doing so, she became a "warrior woman," living her life on her own terms and speaking out against injustice.

The third "warrior woman," poet June Jordan, as Malala said "realizes the importance of her voice." In Jordan's *Poem about My Rights*, she fights against various forms of subjugation. Her approach is psychological resistance. She writes about both internal and external struggles. She starts the poem by saying "Even tonight I need to take a walk and clear my head about this poem about why I can't go out without changing my clothes my shoes my body posture my gender identity my age my status as a woman alone in the evening" (Jordan). She seems to be having this internal dialogue about what she *wants* to do versus what she feels like she *can* do. She goes on to say "...the point being that I can't do what I want to do with my own body because I am the wrong sex the wrong age the wrong skin" (Jordan). She points out all of society's perceived "wrongs" that she sees in herself. Jordan, an African-American woman, does not feel that she is able to walk alone at night because due to her gender and her race, she will not be safe. Jordan begins to focus on external struggles as she examines rape culture and the practice of blaming the victim rather than the attacker. She says "...In France they say if a guy penetrates but does not ejaculate then he did not rape me and if after stabbing him if after screams if after begging the bastard and if even after smashing a hammer to his head if even after that if he and his buddies fuck me after that then I consented and there was no rape because finally you understand finally they fucked me

over because I was wrong I was wrong again to be me being where I was/wrong to be who I am" (Jordan). Jordan is pointing out the true "wrongness" of rape and victim blaming, while also making note of her "wrongs," as deemed by society. She notes how the system supports the rapist, not the victim. The rapist inherently has more rights, because he is a man. Jordan then uses rape as a symbol for what has been done to Africa. She then begins to touch on the C. I. A. in the United States, and their abuse of power. She says "Back in 1966 the C. I. A. decided that they had this problem and the problem was a man named Nkrumah so they killed him and before that it was Patrice Lumumba" (Jordan). "Patrice Lumumba, the first legally elected prime minister of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), was assassinated 50 years ago today, on 17 January, 1961. This heinous crime was a culmination of two inter-related assassination plots by American and Belgian governments, which used Congolese accomplices and a Belgian execution squad to carry out the deed" (Nzongola-Ntalaja). Jordan then begins to look at her upbringing. "...It was my father saying I was wrong saying that I should have been a boy because he wanted one...It was my mother pleading plastic surgery for my nose and braces for my teeth" (Jordan). Jordan grew up in a rather unstable household, where her father frequently beat her. Her parents also did not provide much encouragement to her in her pursuit of becoming a poet. Jordan says "My father wanted me to grow up to be a doctor. My mother wanted me to marry one. Being a poet to them did not compute" ("Biography: June Jordan"). Jordan continues, saying "I am the history of rape I am the history of the rejection of who I am I am the history of the terrorized incarceration of myself I am the history of battery assault and limitless armies against whatever I want to do with my mind and my body and my soul and whether it's about walking out at night or whether it's about the love that I feel or whether it's about the sanctity of my vagina or the sanctity of my national boundaries or the sanctity of my leaders or the sanctity of each and every desire that I know from my personal idiosyncratic and indisputably single and singular heart I have been

raped" (Jordan). Jordan is saying here that due to all these external factors; political patriarchy and gender, cultural, and racial restrictions or oppression, she is denied the right to be her true self. "In 1955, when Jordan married, interracial marriages faced great opposition" ("Biography: June Jordan"). Cultural norms at that time dictated that she could not love who she wanted. Her parents disapproved of her gender, her appearance, and her occupation. The United States have built in systems that oppress her gender and her race. All of these things have an effect on her psyche. She wants to just be herself, but every time she tries, she checks herself. She is angry with herself for letting these things prevent her from being who she is. She says "...But let this be unmistakable this poem is not consent I do not consent to my mother to my father to the teachers to the F. B. I. to South Africa to Bedford-Stuy to Park Avenue to American Airlines to the hardon idlers on the corners to the sneaky creeps in cars" (Jordan). The way she presents these struggles is similar to dropping a pebble in the water, causing ripples that continuously circle out. She starts within herself, and then goes from home, to neighborhood, to city, to country, to world. She ends by saying "I am not wrong: Wrong is not my name My name is my own my own my own and I can't tell you who the hell set things up like this but I can tell you that from now on my resistance my simple and daily and nightly self-determination may very well cost you your life" (Jordan). "...May very well cost you your life" could be taken literally. She is willing to fight and kill for what she believes in. Although it could also be symbolic—"your life" could mean the lifestyle "you've" grown accustomed to--she is going to fight the oppression that had held her back. Jordan began the poem by pointing out all her "wrongs." However, by the end of the poem, Jordan has resolved her inner struggle of why she cannot think and do what she wants to do. She says "I am not wrong: Wrong is not my name." She is owning who she is and demanding respect. She no longer says that she is "wrong," rather she demonstrates a resolve to be true to herself and defy the situational context which had previously kept her true self restrained.

The last "warrior woman," comes from Maxine Hong Kingston's book, *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts*. The "warrior" in this case being Hong Kingston's aunt, known as the no-name woman. Her fight manifests in the resistance to cultural norms. Hong Kingston first hears about her aunt from her mother. She tells her that her father had a sister, though he denies it. No one in the family will say her name. Hong Kingston's mother says that in 1924, the no-name woman became pregnant, although her husband had been dead for quite some time. The villagers in the town where she resided noticed this. One night, a group of them went to her house, wearing masks. They butchered the livestock and wrecked her house. "'Pig.' 'Ghost.' 'Pig.' they sobbed and scolded while they ruined our house" (Hong Kingston, 5). Her mother tells her that when the villagers left, "They took sugar and oranges to bless themselves. They cut pieces from the dead animals. Some of them took bowls that were not broken and clothes that were not torn" (Hong Kingston, 5). She says that her aunt gave birth to the baby later that night and in the morning, she found them both dead in the bottom of a well. She goes on to warn Hong Kingston, "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" (Hong Kingston, 5). "Cultural norms are the standards we live by. They are the shared expectations and rules that guide behavior of people within social groups. Cultural norms are learned and reinforced from parents, friends, teachers and others while growing up in a society" (Sieck). Hong Kingston's mother uses this story as a means to "reinforce" these norms. During the time of the no-name woman, China was an overwhelmingly patriarchal society. Women were subordinate to men. Their whole existence was dominated by the men in their lives. Practices such as foot binding and arranged marriages were a common occurrence. Due to social and economic reasons, male offspring were preferred over female. In lieu of more details, Hong

Kingston begins to imagine scenarios that led to her aunt's pregnancy. She wonders if her aunt was raped by someone she knew. She pictures him threatening her to remain silent, and adhering to the role of women in Chinese culture at that time, she complied. Hong Kingston envisions that it was the man who alerted the villagers to her pregnancy and incited the mob. She then switches narratives. Now, she conjures up images of her aunt grooming herself in front of a mirror. She is in love and trying to make herself more attractive to her lover. She imagines that her aunt's family must have made sit at "the outcast table." Hong Kingston writes "In a commensal tradition, where food is precious, the powerful older people made wrongdoers eat alone. Instead of letting them start separate new lives like the Japanese, who could become samurais and geishas, the Chinese family, faces averted but eyes glowering sideways, hung onto the offenders and fed them leftovers. My aunt must have lived in the same house as my parents and eaten at an outcast table" (Hong Kingston, 7). Finally, she pictures her aunt giving birth in the pigsty. She imagines the internal dialogue her aunt might have had. She writes "She may have gone to the pigsty as a last act of responsibility: she would protect this child as she had protected its father. It would look after her soul, leaving supplies on her grave. But how would this tiny child without family find her grave when there would be no marker for her anywhere, neither in the earth nor the family hall? No one would give her a family hall name…A child with no decent line would not soften her life but only trail after her, ghostlike, begging her to give it purpose" (Hong Kingston, 15). She continues, "Carrying the baby to the well shows loving. Otherwise abandon it. Turn its face into the mud. Mothers who love their children take them along. It was probably a girl; there is some hope of forgiveness for boys" (Hong Kingston, 15). In killing herself and her baby, the no-name woman is rebelling against patriarchy and the oppression of women in Chinese society. She is resisting the culture that would make her and her child social outcasts for the rest of their lives. Rather than allow herself to be dominated by cultural norms, she decides to end her life. While on the surface,

it may appear as giving up, but really, she is defeating the system. Her refusal to let cultural norms dictate her life and the life of her child is how she becomes a “warrior woman.” She drowns herself in the family well, in water that gives life. In a way, it is as if she is cleansing herself and her baby of the patriarchal rule that would dominate their lives. She chooses this ritual cleansing instead of living in the “filth” of a patriarchal society.

These women, while having different situational contexts, have each developed their own way to fight against oppression, whether it is physically, socially, psychologically, or culturally--they all become “warrior women.” They each have an indomitable spirit, and refuse to let patriarchy rule their lives. As Malala, a modern day “warrior woman” said “The terrorists thought that they would change my aims and stop my ambitions but nothing changed in my life, except this: weakness, fear and hopelessness died. Strength, power and courage was born” (Vaidyanathan).

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