

Ethnic Identity

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Visible and Invisible Ethnicity

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Throughout her literature work, Edith Maud Eaton explores how invisible ethnicity can be different from visible ethnicity by narrating her experience as a Eurasian. Eaton identifies the connecting links between gender and ethnicity by pointing out her personal experiences while residing in Canada and America. Having had an English father and a Chinese mother, Eaton is of a mixed race; hence she uses the name Sui Sin Far to identify with her Chinese ethnicity. She often received prejudice from both the races that she belonged to. However, in many instances, no one recognized that she was of Chinese origin unless she admitted it. This aspect as portrayed by Eaton is an indication of how invisible ethnicity continues to prevail among many Asian Americans living in the Western countries specifically America, Canada, and Europe. The central theme of her literary work in *Leaves from the Mental Portfolio of a Eurasian* revolves around the struggle of many Chinese immigrants who strain to gain acceptance in North America. This article attempts to establish the difference between visible and invisible ethnicity with referenced to Eaton's work of literature.

Firstly humans vary in terms of skin color, the shape of the eyes as well as hair texture. However, in some cases, these distinctions cannot be used as criteria to determine a subject of ethnic origin. At some point in life, we have been asked to identify someone's race by looking at their physical appearance. African Americans can be defined by looking at their skin color which is likely to point out that they are of mixed African and American ethnicity. Consequently, the visible ethnicity forms the visible minority who are often become victims of racism in European countries. In her literature, Eaton points an incident where a woman of Asian origin refused to marry a white because he wanted her to deny her Chinese ethnicity. This experience is different from that of many African American writers who often fall victims of racism because of their visible ethnicity. Toni Morrison is an example of an African American writer who attempts to

establish the divisions brought about by racial differences using different characters in her work of literature. Throughout her work, Morrison writes about a home where race does not play a vital role, a home that she dreams of in her.

The experience of many African Americans is represented through various characters that Morrison uses including Geraldine, Junior, and Maureen Peal. These characters represent the privileged minority in the black culture. Just like in the case of Eaton, ethnicity plays a significant role when it comes to social interactions since most people can identify a person's origin by observing some distinct physical features. Also, in her literature, there is a distinction between the light-Skinned African Americans as well as the black African Americans. Many African Americans who are more light skinned are often qualified to be of American origin than their black African American counterparts. Similarly, Eaton is often rejected by her Chinese people because they term her to be white. The inability to differentiate someone's origin by their physical appearance is based on the idea of invisible ethnicity.

Further, the divided society of African Americans is represented in the work of Morrison by pointing out how Maureen Peal, is different from the lower class African Americans residing in the United States. These differences are witnessed in Eaton's literature where she points out the experiences of Asian women living in European countries and who have visible ethnicity. Therefore, it is evident how different a person's experience can be when they can choose when to reveal their identity. The fact that someone's identity is not visible often saves them from the oppression and discrimination that many immigrants are subjected to in America as well as European countries. When a subject is in a position to choose her ethnicity, they are often faced with the feeling of not belonging. However, Eaton seems to ignore this fact and becomes

determined to remain amid the two racial origins. She terms herself as Eurasian, an indication that she is not ready to denounce her origins.

Additionally, Eaton's experience is different from that of her fellow Asians since unlike her, they do not have the opportunity to choose their ethnicity. The visible ethnicity has acted as a barrier to many African Americans often becoming discriminated due to their racial origins. In other words, the apparent ethnicity forms the foundations of racism in both America and European societies. Some of the Asian immigrants like Eaton can only be recognized as a result of their will to reveal their ethnic identity. Therefore this changes their experience in the foreign countries where they are perceived as belonging to the white community. However, they often face challenges when interacting with people from their Asian countries where they are viewed as white people. African Americans have a different experience when it comes to ethnic identity since they belong to the visible minority.

In my own experience, I have met many students who claim to have a Chinese ascent yet their physical appearances bring out a different perspective. The fact that their hair, eyes, and color resembled that of the whites made it difficult for people to recognize their origin. However, I noticed that people started treating them differently when they became satisfied that they were of Chinese origin. The people they were hanging out with before they declared themselves as of Asian origin changed their perceptions towards them. However, in different social situations other than in school, people treated them as if they were their fellow whites since they were not able to recognize their Asian ethnicity. These experiences have enlightened my knowledge of how people can react differently when someone's ethnic identity is invisible. The fact that Eaton was of mixed races and yet people identified her as a white depicts the fact that invisible ethnicity is almost non-existent. Through the experience of Eaton in her literature in comparison

with African American writers, it is clear that visible and invisible ethnicity are significantly different.

Reference

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