

ENGL1102M

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**“Invisibility and Isolation as Indicative
of the Asian American Female Voice”**

Invisibility and isolation, as indicative of the Asian American female voice and Asian Americans, bear many burdens in the post-World War II era; society denies the Asian Americans a sense of belonging in this country by ostracizing them from their own communities. Asian American authors write of the strife of their people and of the manner in which their people cope with this oppression; a common thread exists in these works – Asian Americans feel invisible and isolated. Their feelings of isolation are a direct result of years of ostracism, and their feelings of invisibility occur from society’s indifference towards their people. Noreen Groover Lape contends that “writers from [this group] . . . evince a concern for social justice and frustration at America’s failure to live up to its own ideals” (146), namely the ideals of toleration and acceptance for all. Janice Mirikitani and Woon Ping Chin confront these issues that plague Asian Americans in “Spoils of War” and “In My Mother’s Dream,” respectively; these authors each portray a female persona, but the voices wielded by these personae are quite distinct from one another. The female voices found in each of the works have to, as Lape asserts, “struggle to assimilate into mainstream culture” (146); however, their attempts are in vain, because society has forced them to live a life of solitude and invisibility. The personae of Mirikitani’s “Spoils of War” and Chin’s “In My Mother’s Dream” offer a unique juxtaposition of traditional and nontraditional female voices reacting to the invisibility and isolation felt by Asian Americans in the post-World War II era; the reader can examine similarities and differences between these personae by looking at their concerns, reactions, and ideals as they relate to the burdens suffered by Asian Americans.

Chin develops a traditional female voice as the persona for “In My Mother’s Dream”; the invisibility and isolation that she feels become evident to the reader through her traditionally-female concerns. The void that envelops this persona stems from the “forced solitude” (Chin 32) she endures as an Asian American in the post-World War II era; Chin communicates this feeling of isolation and its ramifications primarily through the examination of the domestic sphere. The persona’s distress manifests itself in “wet torn clothes” (11) and “damp walls” (13); this domestic imagery demonstrates the squalor that torments this motherly persona, and her concern with domestic strife secures her role as a traditional female voice. In addition to these household concerns, the persona also concerns herself with matters of community; she becomes troubled that “her elders’ graves are overgrown” (32) and that her “relatives . . . mock/ [her] with . . . pitiful gifts” (21-22). These concerns are distinctly female, and so by showing the effects of invisibility and isolation through this persona’s concerns with the community and the domestic sphere, Chin creates a persona that is traditionally female.

While traditional female voices embody domesticity and, by extension, a domestic community, any deviation from this traditional female norm presents the reader with a different voice, however slight in variation. Mirikitani’s persona in “Spoils of War,” Hatsuko, is an example of such a case, where a slight deviation creates quite a different persona. Although Hatsuko also battles the invisibility and isolation felt by Asian Americans in the post-World War

II era, the reader sees her struggle illustrated through imagery and concerns that are absent in Chin's work. An emphasis on individuality sets Hatsuko apart from the motherly persona in Chin's poem; she labors over being "faceless" (Mirikitani 189) and without identity, a concern that does not trouble her traditionally female counterpart. Individuality is a trait inherent in the male voice, and disregarding the norms, Mirikitani blends this male attribute into the female persona. Hatsuko reflects on her "nameless face" (189), ridiculing her position in society and condemning her absence of identity; of these two personae, Hatsuko stands alone in her concern with her individuality. Alone, she runs counter to the female norm and its concern with domestic injustices; instead, she adopts the male voice's characteristic personal struggle, abandoning any domestic concerns as she strives to find her identity. She seeks to feel the "terrible emptiness" (192) inside herself with the discovery of an identity of which society has deprived her; for her, the invisibility and isolation that has oppressed her for "as long as she [can] remember" (188) manifests itself in an absence of identity, which varies from the traditional female voice by blending it with attributes of the male voice.

Although these personae differ in their primary concerns, their reactions to the invisibility and isolation imposed upon them are similar. Both of these personae cope by internalizing their trauma; Chin's persona deals with conflict by escaping to the safety of a dream, as indicated by the title of the piece, while Hatsuko mulls over issues, debating them in her head. Though Chin's persona recedes into her mind to escape and Hatsuko to understand and find strength, they both withdraw from life and maintain passive roles. The motherly persona of "In My Mother's Dream," imagines a place where "there is no pain" (Chin 1) felt by Asian Americans from years of invisibility and isolation; she passively accepts her reality by resigning herself to escapism, and this passivity furthers her categorization in the role of the traditional female. Pin-chia Feng, in her study of Fu Sang, asserts that "in her passivity, [Fu Sang] . . . represents a philosophy of survival by early Asian immigrants" (63), and this survival tactic particularly relates to the traditional female voice. Chin depicts this method survival with her persona's passive acceptance of the injustices she encounters; she pushes herself through each day with only her dreams to console her.

Though Hatsuko does not passively accept her situation, she demonstrates passivity in her subordination and lack of action. Her invisibility and isolation persists, despite "her feeble attempts to define herself" (Mirikitani 188); since she "[mouths them] with little resolve" (188), her "weakness [remains] reinforced" (188) and her passivity remains unchanged and unresponsive to her attempt to break the mold. Her try at a more active role demonstrates another crossing of gender lines, though not successfully carried out. Infusing her passive role with an element of activism, again usurps male attributes for a new female voice. However, in this case, Hatsuko holds true to her female stereotype, paralleling Chin's persona by finding it difficult to vocalize her identity in a world dominated by the patriarchy, where she remains doubly jeopardized for being both Asian American and a woman. Here, she is not able to command successfully the active nature of the male voice, but her attempts to do so cause the reader to classify her somewhat differently than Chin's persona, shifting her to a less traditional category.

Though their reactions to invisibility and isolation vary only slightly in their degree of passivity, their ideals, or ideas of life without the burden of invisibility or isolation, show the reader distinct differences. Chin's persona dreams of her family in "crisp, new dresses" (Chin 38), eating "chicken [that] is boiling in its great / wise pot" (41-42); the reader sees the mother's ideals residing in a domestic utopia of family gatherings, where her family remains both fed and clothed. Her focus on domestic well-being again confirms her voice as traditionally female,

Mirikitani, Janice. "Spoils of War." Wong 186-201.

Wong, Shawn, ed. *Asian American Literature: A Brief Introduction and Anthology*.
New York: HarperCollins, 1996.