

Eritrean-Canadian Women *Race, Ethnicity and Gender*

BY RAHEL ARAYA OGBAGZY

L'auteure examine comment les femmes qui ont émigré de l'Erythrée pour venir au Canada ont vécu cet ajustement et l'impact sur leur identité sexuelle, raciale et ethnique.

Very often women of colour are called upon to identify with and act upon various elements of their identities which intersect. One may ask, "Is a Black woman Black or a woman first?" The identity constructs of race and gender through their intersections are the dominant elements which determine immigrant women's socio-economic positions and relations. These elements are neither permanently static nor always compatible, at times coming into direct conflict with one another.

As members of the dominant society, Eritrean women feel their gender identities and relations while keenly being conscious of their ethnic and national identities in relation to the majority ethnic group with social, political, or economic power. As minority immigrants in North America, the preoccupation with ethnicity may shift to one of racial identity which might at times overshadow gender with contextual variations. Yet, it is a gross error to categorize Eritrean women under a monolithic "Third World Woman" category (Sen and Grown), or to talk of the "black experience" (hooks). Mitsude Yamada contends of race and gender identities that:

The two are not at war with one another: we shouldn't have to sign a "loyalty oath" favoring one over the other. However, women of colour are often

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made to feel that we must make a choice between the two. (73)

This "loyalty oath" issue comes into play in the daily experiences of women of colour from third world countries, whose varying degrees of race, ethnicity, and gender as well as other factors such as class, occupation, age, and religion determine a sense of who they are and at what stage. This "gear-changing" syndrome was one that divided Black women during the Anita Hill-Clarence Thomas debate.

Some blacks supported Thomas on racial grounds; others opposed him on sexual grounds. Black women were divided, depending on whether their "identities" as blacks or as women prevailed. (Hall 279-280)

The O.J. Simpson trial was another recent example of gender-race

"divided loyalties." Although Eritrean immigrant women's fundamental identities may be based on race, ethnicity, and gender, any divorcing of identities may sometimes ignore their diverse experiences. Yuval-Davis explains the dangers of monolithic categorizations of identity and states that, "... the politics of identity devalues the diverse and conflicting experiences of the people it attempts to represent" (417). This comment belies the diverse attitudes and experiences of my ten thesis research participants.

When I first asked my participants how they viewed themselves in terms of race and gender I received a wide range of responses. The first woman responded with a sense of strong ethnic identification and said she preferred to be called a "person of colour." On gender, this participant neither felt her gender identity nor identified with women's issues since she believed focusing on them only served to portray Black women as "complaining weaklings." She did not feel marginalized and had never considered herself in any way discriminated against by gender or race, especially at work. As a Canadian citizen she felt that she had access to everything a White male had access to. For this woman, gender and race were irrelevant while she presented her identity and adjustment struggle on the basis of Eritrean ethnicity.

Another woman did not believe in racial categories which she believed made broad and sweeping categorizations of millions of people. On how she viewed herself, she replied:

In fact to tell you frankly, I don't see my identity in colour at all and I have never said, "You know, I'm a Black woman." I would prefer to say "minority" instead of "Black" or "White."

Her preference for an identity based on nationality rather than on race or colour stands valid by the following example she gave. She noticed that the inquiries on racial identity on some government job application forms are flawed. While there are just the two racial categories of "Black" and "White" boxes to be checked, there are other "racial" categories based on geographical regions such as "Southeast Asian," "West Asian," and "Southwest Asian." Because other ethnic groups are accurately and specifically categorized by region, she felt insulted that both Blacks and Whites were lumped in monolithic categories. By that same reasoning, why were Africans not categorized by region such as "East African" or "West African?" As members of the Arab world would Egyptians classify themselves as West Asians although they were not in Asia? Would they check the "Black" box because they were in Africa? Such questions remain unanswered by such flawed racial categorizations. This participant stated that she always skipped the "Black" box and wrote "Eritrean" in the bottom reserved for "Other" to make her point

One woman states:

I guess I am a female first. I think that's the first. Then the Black, the colour issue. But my identity as a female is right there first, then you can address issues like colour or as a Black person but I think of in terms of "I am a female."

Another woman presented her identity as a Black Eritrean woman but admitted that her Eritrean identity was the most prominent one:

I'm not just Eritrean. I'm a

woman. I'm Black. I'm all these things at the same time. You know what I mean? I can't choose to be one more than the other.... The first thing that obviously I am is a woman. You can see that obviously I am not a White person, you know. And another thing that I want people to

"I want people to recognize that we always take time to say, 'I am Eritrean.' And people ask me, 'Does that make you Black?' I say, 'Well ... look at me. Don't I look like people of colour?'"

recognize is that we always take time to say, "I am Eritrean." And people ask me, "Is that Black? Does that make you Black?" I say, "Well, yeah. We're people of colour. I mean look at me. Don't I look like people of colour?"

Another interesting point she and the first participant shared with the other women in the study was that as Eritreans in Eritrea or Ethiopia, they had not been critically aware of their Black racial identity since they had lived as the majority in ethnic/racial enclaves with the exception of Eritrea under colonial Italy and its Fascist racial segregation policy. The second participant added that when she first came to Canada as a child she had not been aware that she was Black or a member of a race until someone mentioned that she was Black. Her initial discovery of race and racism ironically cemented her ethnicity rather than her racial identity because her first encounter

with racism, or rather cultural racism, came not from Whites but from Blacks in her school. She recalled a painful childhood experience in Grade Three:

And it was the time of famine in Ethiopia and they just had this idea that we were all poor, starving children and even if we were you'd think they'd show some sympathy. They were being rude all day. They were like, "Shoot Ethiopians!" It was like a big campaign. Everybody hated Ethiopians!

This woman became very confused since she had embraced her Black identity and was trying to socialize with other Blacks. The Black students did not view Ethiopians, including Eritreans, as Black but as belonging to a different category with which they did not identify. In spite of these taunts, she made an effort to befriend them and participated in Black History Month activities as she tried to tell them about her culture. However, she adds,

... they just had enormous animosity and I couldn't understand where it came from because they themselves [famine victims] didn't do anything ... there was just so much hatred against them and it was hard for a while ... and it just got to the point where even if they thought you were a cute girl or if you were pretty, they'd say, "Why would you think she's pretty? She's Ethiopian!"

She was baffled by the racism she encountered from Blacks in her school while she had not encountered any racism from Whites in some of the predominantly White schools she had attended which had been dominated by Italians and Croats. She did, however, experience loneliness.

She states, "... it is a terrible thing to be by yourself and not have

anybody there that's like you."

In spite of her negative experiences with other Blacks, this woman still retains a great interest in Black history as well as third world issues and has become a staunch supporter of anti-racism initiatives and policies. For her, anti-racism means not only addressing colour barriers and discrimination, but also the bias and conflict within the Black community itself.

There is a rift between African Blacks whose racial experiences are based mostly on colonial racism and who have been racial majorities within their own nations, and Caribbean and North American Blacks who tend to look down on "third world" Africans as "third-rate" or backward and who take offense at being mistaken for African, although they take great pride in being called African-Canadian. Ghanaian Henry Codjoe summarizes this view as he states, "The mere mention of Africa and I'm looked at upon with some mixture of pity and bewilderment" (233). It is obvious that racial and ethnic discrimination are also based on the socio-economic development status of third world countries. For example, had Ethiopia been a highly industrialized nation with a high per capita income, this second participant's then-Ethiopian citizenship most probably would have made her acceptable. Again, one can look at the former South African Apartheid system which categorized the Chinese as coloured but favoured the Japanese with exceptional "near-White" or White status for economic purposes since there was heavy Japanese investment in South Africa (Enahoro; Fage).

The bias against African immigrants is also reinforced by the western media who often portray Africans as economically dependent, politically corrupt, and though "culturally rich," somehow "uncivilized." Canadian television programs such as those on World Vision, undoubtedly one of the most hu-

manitarian organizations with a worthy cause, sometimes inadvertently reinforce the images others have of Africa as a poverty, famine, and war-infested region while they neglect presenting the positive aspects. In other words, Africa is seldom in media headlines unless under catastrophic conditions. For

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example, Moussa's (1992, 1993) Ethiopian research participants were angered by the media's portrayal of the Ethiopian famine and Canadians' assumptions that immigrants from that region came to Canada as famine victims and not as political ones.

At the same time, analyses of political issues are not critical enough. For example, the Ogoni massacre and Ken Saro Wiwa's 1995 execution in Nigeria are not analyzed within the context of western capitalist interests in Nigeria but rather presented on the surface simply as "brutality" exercised by a repressive African government. Africa is also sometimes used as a romantic backdrop or "ethnic setting" for non-documentary, commercial films which do not always depict reality.

There is another perspective of the African versus the North American Black conflict. The second participant who experienced cultural

racism from other Blacks was baffled by what she called Eritreans', Ethiopians', as well as other Africans' "lack of racial awareness." She adds, "... we have to understand that the only way you can progress is not only within your community but as a whole." Her focus was on Black unity which she explains by emphasizing the struggle of Black North Americans,

...we would not have anywhere near these opportunities to come here and learn if they weren't here. We are the product of what they have fought for.

Another aspect of racial identity and difference is one encountered by Eritreans, Ethiopians, and Somalis or East Africans. Since these ethnic groups are becoming easily distinguishable from other North American and Caribbean Blacks as well as other Africans by their physical appearance, this may act as a constant reminder of the notion of ethnicity and difference in self-perception as well as identification or categorization by others. Many Eritreans, Ethiopians, and Somalis sometimes express being mistaken as Indian, Indo-Caribbean, Arab, or Hispanic since many Canadians, including other Blacks, cannot categorize them in any other racial "slot." One woman comments:

Sometimes they mistake me for Caribbean or Indian but I make sure I tell them I'm from Africa. Especially to other Black people.... I tell them but they do not remember.

One woman was told by another Black,

...you're beige too. I don't think you're pure Black 'cause [of] your hair and complexion. Check your ancestor, probably from Spanish.

This notion of identity categorization based on other people's

perceptions raises the important issue of race as reality or as perception. If a person is Black but is perceived by others as "non-Black" and treated as a non-Black or even as a member of another racial category, this questions the validity of present racial categories or the need to have them. This is also related to "race" as a socio-ideological and non-biological construct (Dei; Miles) and shows the fluidity or shifting nature of race/ethnicity within socio-historical contexts. For example, in Brazil some people who are categorized as "White" suddenly find themselves categorized as "Black" in Canada. Another example is the dominance of ethnic clans in Somalia which is replaced by a simple categorization of "Black" in Canada. Nevertheless, recently Somalis are increasingly becoming recognized as an ethnic group rather than as members of a racial group.

For most of the participants in the study who had simply considered themselves Eritrean women, their Black racial identity emerged when they faced racist remarks or incidents. One woman said abusive treatment under a White teacher made her realize she was discriminated against because she was a Black immigrant whose knowledge of the English language was not proficient and whose "immigrant culture" was targeted. Once she went to her Member of Parliament to inquire about a relative's immigration status and ended up having a heated argument with the White "East-European immigrant secretary who spoke with a heavy accent." The secretary asked irrelevant questions rudely and the woman became upset. The secretary's questions were politically incorrect as she asked this woman—a Canadian citizen—"Where are you from?" She comments:

They just think you're Black and they have the right to ask you rude questions. They have the

attitude that Blacks are not Canadians. Not all Whites are Canadian-born. They came like us. They are landed but they treat you like outsiders.

This woman also encountered some racist remarks from schoolmates who told her, "Go back home! Go to your country!" to which she responded:

First you finish your life here in Canada and then you go back home and then I will go.... It's not your country here. This is only Indian's country.

Her response was based on her firm belief that Canada was a country of immigrants and that the only group of people who could challenge her citizenship rights were the Native peoples.

Another woman expressed her Black racial identity as having emerged in her job-search experiences. When she would talk to prospective employers over the telephone they would often mistake her for a White woman because of proficiency in the English language as well as because of her European, Biblical name. They would react differently when she presented herself in person. "I go there because they think I'm White and as I'm there it starts from the secretaries." The secretaries' polite yet disapproving manner unnerved her, showing the subtle and underhanded manner by which systemic racism functions. Another woman added that employers in privately-owned companies were the ones with the autonomy to choose racially or ethnically "suitable" candidates and who gently ushered out "undesirable" candidates with gentle coos like, "You're overqualified," "We want Canadian experience," or "Sorry the position has just been filled." The job-search experience was therefore one in which most of the women encountered racism and a strong identification with

Blackness. One of the salient aspects of racism is that it does not have to be acted upon or uttered but can also be experienced in the form of an uncomfortable feeling or intuition. One of the participants gave such an example,

... some teachers were very good and some had a negative view of Blacks. They would have their own opinions of people. No one said anything to me but it was something I felt.

Another woman adds "... you can read it. You know how they treat you ... you can tell.... You can feel it."

One of the women who had strongly identified with gender issues had painful experiences of racism which strengthened her Black identity. She first experienced racism in Canada when she was looking for an apartment. She would make some phone calls to landlords or superintendents and would be told to come and view the apartment. Upon arrival, the superintendent would tell her that the apartment had been rented a few minutes earlier. Another woman recounted an identical story about when she tried to rent a single room. "That's when I started to see racism in Canada. I can't say it was as a female but colour-wise[it was a] very critical issue." In order to rent the room, this woman had a White friend inquire about rooms and rent them in her name.

After another woman had been repeatedly rejected for several apartments, she decided to apply only for basement apartments thinking they would be less in demand and not worthy of her application's rejection. When the superintendent saw her he said, "I don't trust immigrants. I want post-dated cheques for one year." After she had given him the cheques, he still treated her rudely and would tell her in a brash manner not to

touch the washing machines and dryers the wrong way. The misconception he had of immigrants and refugees was one of poverty and dirt. His manner towards her was to make her feel like he was doing her a favour. She comments,

... it shows you what kind of thinking they have towards Blacks. It makes you sad. Another time they spotted a rat going into a neighbour's apartment right above mine. Because I am a refugee they thought I brought it.

Again she added, "...they saw cockroaches and they called the owner on me and complained that cockroaches had to come from [the] refugees." Although she laughed while recounting that story, her pain was evident in her next statement:

An old basement apartment because I am a refugee so they can't give a damn. I am garbage. I felt sad. But I told them, "You are right. You don't know me. You know me here as a refugee."

For many refugees in Canada, being a refugee meant being safe in a new host country, feeling relieved, and being able to express oneself. This woman had thought being a refugee was nothing to be ashamed of and was appalled to see that others had a different understanding of the term. For many it is a label used to refer to third world immigrants who are "taking away all the jobs" or "milking the Canadian welfare system." Not only do they have misconceptions and racist views but they also act on them. Victimized by repressive governments in their homelands, refugees are again victimized in other ways in their new, host country.

The shifting nature of identities where one dominates in certain situations over another, and vice versa, reveal the complex construction of identity through diverse experiences. Although these

women's adjustment experiences brought their racial identities to the surface, they held on to their Eritrean ethnic identity. A few negated the notion of race, racial difference, and racism. The two participants who stressed they had never experienced any racism in Canada reminded me of Rumble's Somali participants who stated that they had never encountered racism. Rumble concluded that her participants were not yet attuned to the subtle nature of racism because they lacked an understanding of "cultural and linguistic nuances" of Canadian society (70). Moussa made a similar observation when one of her participants from an Ethiopian "caste group" felt that her own Ethiopian government was racist compared to the Canadian government which accepted her. Moussa concluded, "She was obviously not as yet aware of institutional racism" (1993: 228). In contrast, these two participants, successful professionals with excellent English-language proficiency and several years of residency in Canada, are but one facet of diversity in immigrants' experiences and their understanding of reality.

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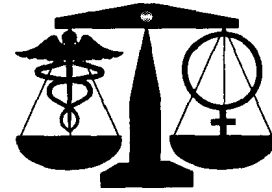
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