

## **A Critical Reading of Frederick James Wah**

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### **Abstract**

Looking at critical point of view is a good deal to decide many works, so here I look and re-interpret the selected works of Fred Wah who justifies himself as half Chinese and half Canadian through his hyphenated subjectivity and hybrid nature. In this article I focus on Wah's ideological position as an intellectual writer. It means his way of approaching allows him to think and stand as a distinguished writer and his ambivalent attitude towards justifying himself. These different kinds of approaches make us to think how identity can be looked from different perspectives, how the people's perspective has been changing in the changing world through connecting to post-colonial and post-modern perspectives.

**Keywords:** Frederick James Wah, Collapse of authentic identity, hybrid nature, self-location to identity and Wah's ideological position.

### **Introduction**

Fred Wah represents him as half Chinese, half Canadian through his writings. The question of identity was not important in the countries earlier except in multicultural and multilingual countries, but it has been widened. The notion of identity defined by different critics of their opinions. Sometimes identity involves wrenching a self from others, and sometimes it changes for several reasons. For example, by the act of immigration, and even by cultural, racial and ethnic differences it may lead to hybrid nature of identity, but Fred Wah raises questions and expresses his conflicts in his writings. I would like to critique Wah's attitude towards Chinese through my research point of view, because I feel that there is an attempt to justifying personal over group in defining one's individual identity.

Wah rejects and collapses the Local-national with racial issues in his writings. Racial and cultural and ethnic issues are historical and biased as we know but by such kind of recent developments, negotiation becomes an important thing to do. Generally in a world witnessing hurdles and bounds of scientific developments and characterized by new growing values such as globalization, by the influence of globalization and by modern developments the perspective of

the people keeps changing and widening. We can think of it that in the earlier days it was not a great look to negotiate but in the modern days, the perspective has been changing absolutely, though the Wah's case is quite different here.

From the post-Colonial and post-modern perspectives Wah's case stands differently because his approaches seem that he rejects the historical methods and upholds counter memories and racial practices like his father's immigration, ancestors' mixed genealogy, and even from his mother side he questions and tries to justify himself partly as Scandinavian, partly Irish. Because of the racial and cultural inter-mixing, he is unable to do that. He has the identity problem to claim himself to one side. But as we know the notion of identity has been widened by the different standpoint of views, and it has been discussed at the Global context. So we need to negotiate the various notions of identity in the changing world through the case of Wah.

But through his writings Wah does not seem like that he simply rejects a historical method. Adopting this means primitive prejudices which existed early in Canada, China and in some other countries. He never talks about the racism and ethnic practices which have existed in Canada. His approach seems creative because he does not keep in his mind and write the old racial practices. He narrates his personal, intimate stories throughout his writings rather than about historical past. It means he narrates his personal life experiences, what he has experienced.

Though there are several types of identities like psychological, social, cultural, ethnic, etc Wah raises the issues about nationality. This type of identity could be questioned. When it was in crisis, it is a matter of border, location, language, etc. Wah valorizes the local and rejects national identity. From this point of view we can consider him as a very distinguished writer among the Canadian writers.

Wah raises voice on personal or individual identity rather than group or community. He does not speak about it, particularly in his writings. He defines one's identity personally over group: presenting his family ancestry and racial, cultural intermixing Wah defends himself and at the same time he expresses his racial anger towards the society. As we know race, ethnicity makes human different and it divides human into certain groups, but Wah justifies himself not by that racial context. That's why he valorized local identity and rejected the national. By these we can posit Wah as an ideological and intellectual writer.

At the national context, by this changes and this development is quite common in multicultural and multilingual countries (Canada, China, America). Such countries have a problem to provide the single national identity for people who have multicultural background around the world. Then the issue of identity can be questioned and has to be negotiated to provide single national identity. In this eventuality, the crisis of identity would arise and that's

hoe Erick Erickson, who is a post-colonial writer, defines the crisis of identity in his article. The same has happened in the life of Fred Wah because he is from a mixed cultural racial background; he investigates his half Chineseness and Canadianness from his mixed ancestry and even from his mother's side who is Scottish-Irish.

### **Objective of the Study**

- 1 Wah posits himself as an intellectual writer through his own ideological perspectives in his writings.
- 2 Wah upholds binary thinking and made focus on counter memories and practices.
- 3 Wah connects from self-location to identity. It continues in the transformation of the individualization, (from its father's immigration) (dislocation) hyphenatedness.
- 4 His writings seem to us he values more local; at the same time he rejects national issues and he defines one's self-identity rather than group.
- 5 Hyphenated subjectivity and ethnic subjectivity and making hybridized his self-identity are major subjects in Wah's writings.
- 6 Wah may draw his self -identity to western or eastern tradition, but he fails to do that, and he does not easily reconcile with his racial issues.
- 7 In this section main objectives are how Wah justifies his identity through hybrid nature which is created by him in his writings and more importantly how we can criticize his attitude from certain critical points of view.

### **Research Methodology**

Content analysis is one of the research methods in the study of literature. This method presents us a massive range of documents, both in print and electronic media. The content analysis emphasises more on the analysis of non-numeric data such as written works, articles, interview, audio and video and so on. Content analysis is also described as the analysis of documents from past times and artifacts. Sometimes these may be non-linguistic material also. In this research paper, the researcher is following the content analysis research methodology focusing on the selected works of Fred Wah.

### **Critical Look at Wah's Attitude**

Wah's writings are not only revealing his own life and battles but in the larger picture a commentary on Canadian society. Eventually, his experience of racism as well as his assimilation racism is a consequence of how society marginalizes people based on their race. Fred grew up in the fifties in a small town, Nelson BC, where racism and prejudice towards Chinese people were extensive. Wah, who is 1/2 Swedish, 1/4 Chinese, 1/8 Irish and 1/8 Scottish, discusses his fight with his identity as other people tried to tell him what he was.

After his teacher assigns Chinese identity to him in his school, Wah goes on to say how in the schoolyard the Chinese kids thought of him as the foreigner, and so he ended up playing against them since he was ‘white enough to play on the winning team. What I felt is that the racial origin is partially illuminated through the schooling in those days. It is this back and onward of being told by people that he was Chinese or being determined white that caused Wah to be unsure of his identity. He was continuously being classified and judged by society, which as a result led him to not feeling agreeable. Wah presents his race as he understood it. At the same time he rejects the primitive race system which exists both in China and Canada.

In his racial writing, Wah addresses hybridity as meticulous and lively. In the conflagration around racialized writing, he works out the particularity in between and for him hybridity in writing is understood as a more complicated possibility in his late pieces of poems and novels. We can refer here Homi Bhaba who influences much on hybridity. He mobilizes and understands that he himself creates, narrates and defends himself from his own stand point of view.

Wah introduces us to many of Asian Canadian writers in his writings, like Jim Wong-Chu, Sky Lee, Roy Miki, and Gerry Shilkatani who seek to level out and rewrite the colonizing racial discrimination of western transnational ideologies, but he partially makes himself different from their writings and style of representation.

*Diamond Grill*, his master fiction, figures the Chinese-Canadian background for interrogating some of the complications of racialization and hybridity. Through this novel Wah attempts to present his racial differences.

Engaging with his racial identity Wah raises numerous questions in his text (*Diamond Grill*). When posed in the wider social arena of the nation, that first question — “What am I?” so frequently leads to the question of origins. If the response is Here, I’m from Canada, I’m Canadian,” the diasporic or even post-diasporic individual often faces an additional question that seeks to contain a professed strangeness and put the diasporic individual in his proper location. Like Wah there are other writers have been facing the same problem as Larissa Lai, (Chinese-Canadian) Georges Bugnet, Robert Lepage (French Canadians) Shani Mootoo, Roy Miki, Rohinton Mistry (Asian-Canadian writers). These are all writers who write about racial and cultural intermixing. They investigate the diasporic experiences in their writings, but they are quite different in their style compared to Fred Wah.

In *Breathin My Name with a Sigh* Wah represents his different names as sighs ii breathing his name. This long poem reveals that Wah’s family ancestry has a more extended and more multifaceted background where the “body” cannot survive out of time and space.

The broadest investigation in his works is that hyphenated subjectivity and ethnic subjectivity, and Wah connects his self-Location to Diasporic experiences. Wah again tries to justify himself as, “if you are pure anything, you cannot be Canadian”. We can save the name with mixed blood in the country. If we have heritage days or festival, there will be a group, he says, I can recognize myself with that group: here the narrator tries to enable his racial transpicuousness in the national label. But he does not easily reconcile and accept anything and rejects local, national and racial.

### Research Findings

1. Wah’s self-questioning and arguments encourage readers to think that how we can judge such identities at global level.
2. Wah may draw his self-identity to western or eastern tradition, but he fails to do that, and he does not easily reconcile with his racial issues.
3. He stands by his different kind of presenting self.
4. His writings seem to us that he values more local; at the same time he rejects national issues and he defines one’s self-identity rather than group identity.

### Conclusion

Fred Wah and many other Asian Canadian writers face the identity problem. They express it through their writings. Wah reveals his race and says ‘I’m a Canadian’ but not purely Canadian. By racial and cultural inter-mixing, he is unable to claim him purely Canadian. So Wah finds and examines and keeps discussing racial and ethnic issues. As I observe in his writings, he does not believe in the racial issues; he narrates his life experiences in his style, and he tries to keep changing the mindset of the readers and leads them to keep changing their perspectives. He creates, narrates, and justifies himself and partially fails to prove his single national identity.

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