

Voices
from the
Gaps*The Heart of Hyacinth*
by Onoto Watanna

Winnifred Eaton, writing under the nom de plume Onoto Watanna, is considered a pioneer by many recent scholars because she became the first author to write an Asian American novel, *Miss Numé of Japan: A Japanese American Romance* (1899). Eaton's ideas were progressive because she portrayed interracial relationships in her works, something that was groundbreaking for the time, but which won her immediate success.

She continued writing on these themes in her fourth novel, *The Heart of Hyacinth* (1903). It is an easy-to-read coming-of-age romance novel, but like many of her other books, *The Heart of Hyacinth* was radical for its time. It is set in a picturesque northern Japanese village where Madame Aoi, a Japanese woman who was widowed by the death of her English husband, lives with their son, Komazawa. A few years after her husband's death, Madame Aoi is visited by a dying American woman and her newborn baby girl, Hyacinth, who take refuge with her. The mother makes a final request for Madame Aoi to take care of her child because having suffered under the cruelty of her own culture, she does not want to see Hyacinth returned to her American father.

Madame Aoi honors this vow and raises Hyacinth as a Japanese girl, so much so that Hyacinth does not even realize that she looks different from her classmates until she sees herself in a mirror. She is shocked because she has never before seen herself as separate from the race and culture in which she was raised, although she knows that she was adopted. At the time of this epiphany, Hyacinth has been separated from her surrogate brother, Komazawa, who has been sent to England and is undergoing a transformation of his own, as he is learning the English culture and language of his father. Komazawa returns after he learns that Hyacinth has been betrothed to Yamashiro Yoshida because Komazawa believes that Hyacinth is too young to marry, but by the time he arrives, the marriage has already been called off when the groom's parents decide that he cannot marry a white woman. The situation reaches a climax when Hyacinth's real father tracks her down to reclaim her and to take her back to America. Hyacinth is then forced to choose between her duty to her father and her home, between becoming "white" or keeping a Japanese identity.



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The social importance of this novel is obvious, as Eaton addresses many critical issues in the novel. She skillfully shows the conflict of Hyacinth's position as a white child growing up in a Japanese society and the way in which she identifies herself with that culture. Eaton reinforces that theme in the character of her brother, a biracial child who was trained in both the Japanese and English traditions but then spends years in England, becoming English, taking on their words and mannerisms. Through these two young people, Eaton emphasizes the flaw of using skin color as a determinant for cultural identification and reveals the many different ways that prejudices can be formed.

This is a perfect book for a lazy afternoon. *The Heart of Hyacinth* is filled with poetic language, picturesque imagery, and an entertaining plot, and while it may seem like a tame romance for this day and age, it is especially interesting to read given the political and social climate at the turn of the 20th century.

Reviewed by Lindsay Lindgren