

Feature for Heritage

The hidden “F-word” of the immigrant dating scene

How to recognize fetishization as a young woman abroad?

Imagine this - you are a twenty-something year old woman. You've spent your entire life in your home country, surrounded by the comfort of the familiar. Everyone looks similar to you, you share the same language and culture. Yet you've always longed for a life in the land of tea, bad weather and incomprehensible accents. So one day, you pack your bags, say teary goodbyes and in 8 hours, you cringe while everyone is clapping as your plane hits the ground at Heathrow.

The UK is your home now, and maybe it wouldn't be so bad - it's classy, you think, it's multicultural! You fantasise about life in 5 years time - waking up in a trendy Soho apartment, grabbing a Pret on the way to the 9 to 5 job you absolutely adore. Life seems full of possibilities!

You meet your dream date for lunch on a Sunday. Everything seems perfect. He says you're not like other girls. Then he orders you sushi and says how “kawaii” it is that you're enjoying your native cuisine. You're Taiwanese. What the fuck?

Welcome to the western dating scene, where your identity is tossed aside in favour of labels such as “exotic” and “fresh” which would only be fitting for a tropical fruit on the Tesco aisles. Which is in fact, what a lot of men see - a ripe, foreign delicacy they can take a bite of, before going back to eating Granny Smith apples. All the while, you just wish you could scream - I am not a fucking fruit!

The sushi in your mouth turns bitter as you are overcome with confusion, anger and self-doubt. It's time to face it, you were just served fetishization for dessert.

Candice Chen, a 20-year-old architecture student, talked me through some of her most memorable, and dehumanising encounters with the “F- word”:

“On a night out in a club, I met this guy who was trying to chat me up. He was like ‘You’re gonna be really popular here tonight, but only because of Squid Game.’ Second thing he said was even worse ‘Oh, but I’m different, I’ve always liked Asians.’, which is such a red flag.”

Sooner or later, racialized women are put in the vicious circle of a losing game. They either adopt the stereotypes of desirability or feel othered and unlovable. Fetishization reduces the complex nature of women as individuals to a handful of easy to swallow, pleasant assumptions.

“People think saying things like that is ok, because they don’t stop to think how that might affect someone’s perception of themselves. Hearing someone genuinely say it makes me wonder what the reasons are every time I get hit on - is race the only thing they really see? Sometimes you can easily tell, for example if they say konnichiwa to me (that happened three times in a week). I was like ‘What is going on?’”

The idea of foreign women being seen as passive and exotic is more than a harmless stereotype. It makes them more susceptible to objectification other than the dating scene, as they are not perceived outside the lens of desirability. In 2021, an Atlanta shooter who murdered six Asian women in a spa, said he saw them as “a temptation he wanted to eliminate”. Meanwhile, police described it as nothing more than a young, white man’s [“bad day”](#).

Expert works focusing on the issue say fetishization is inherently paradoxical. Ethnic women are showered with sometimes contrasting and seemingly flattering assumptions, which are hard to recognize immediately. It results in a mindset dependent on eurocentric desirability, where many distinct cultures, backgrounds and lives are reduced to a collective, alienated, but exciting and exotic “other”.

Mea Aitken, a sociology graduate and fetishization researcher said: “I think when you exist in a racialized body you are othered in mainstream society and I believe this othering often leads to fetishization.

“There are many ways that fetishization is present in society. I think this is observed particularly in the dating scene where people, predominantly white people, will make comments to people of colour that reduce them to racialised tropes and stereotypes. As a black mixed-race woman, I observe this through the ways I am over-sexualised and

perceived as hyper aggressive, and these stereotypes differ depending on how you are racialized. “

Pop culture doesn't quite go against fetishization either. Ethnic women's depiction in media such as 1995's "Madame Butterfly" or play "Miss Saigon" is depersonalised and soaked in stereotypes. It's like Asian women are reduced to a hypersexual object of fantasy, even in media which is meant to be centred around them.

Candice added: "With old Hollywood films you get the tropes of the Dragon Lady who is super sexy and has mystic powers like jade and dragons and stuff. She is crazy and dominant in bed but will also be a cute little wife who would never fight you.

"With Asians, compared to other races, women are seen as exotic and sexy and different and hypersexual, but at the same time demure and "do whatever you say", which is really weird. I feel like in mixed race relationships, Asian women always wonder if they have to be all of that to be desirable."

So with media, dating and whatnot feeding us fetishization by the spoonful every day, is dating really that hopeless? Of course not. After all, you travelled half the world away to pursue your dream life (just keep thinking of the Soho apartment!). You are way more than a body, a skin colour, or a language. You are more than someone's fantasy. In fact, you are someone's dream.

Mea shared some of her methods to give fetishization the middle finger: "I think as racialized women we get encouraged to accept the bare minimum when people compliment us as we are socialised to think we are less desirable than our white counterparts.

"Still, we have the right to have standards for how we are treated. You shouldn't have to accept being subjected to racially fetishising stereotypes and you certainly should not be expected to be complimented by this. I would encourage, if you feel able to, to talk about these experiences with people that you trust. I think racial fetishization can be an extremely isolating and complex experience so it is important to try and find a support network that can validate your lived experiences. Equally, if you feel in a position to, you have every right to call people out for their inappropriate behaviour."

Word count: 1079

Interviews: Candice Chen - 24/05 - 14:00

Mea Aitken - 28/05 - 17:30