

“WHERE DO WE FALL?”

A HISTORICO-CULTURAL ANALYSIS OF THE POSTCOLONIAL DIASPORIC FEMALE SUBJECT IN DAPHNE PALASI ANDREADES’S *BROWN GIRLS*

RESEARCH

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“For we have built into all of us, old blueprints of expectation and response, old structures of oppression, and these must be altered at the same time as we alter the living conditions which are a result of those structures. For the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house.”

— Audre Lorde, *Age, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference*

INTRODUCTION:

When examining the identity crisis of a second-generation American-born woman of color, it is crucial to note the various cultural, historical, and racial differences that inform how she negotiates her identity within a diasporic space. Daphne Palasi Andreades’s riveting debut novel, *Brown Girls*, is a coming-of-age tale centered on a group of girls from Queens, New York and their exploration and navigation of what it means to be “brown girls” living in America. Through a first-person collective narrator, the “we” in *Brown Girls* echoes like a chorus of young rebellious voices tied together in emotion, experience, and sisterhood. In compact, powerful chapters, Andreades sketches their lives from adolescence to motherhood as they navigate racism, sexuality, relationships, cultural inheritance, and a sense of home. In this paper, I address the inadequacy of second wave feminist movements to recognize and give voice to the plurality of experiences and socio-psychological trajectories of women of color in the U.S. Rather than interpret “brown girls” as a homogenous group in this text,

I read the group of women in *Brown Girls* as 'postcolonial diasporic subjects,' which underlines their agency and their diasporic ties simultaneously.

Second-wave feminism portrays third-world women as a singular group with a similar set of issues. In her essay, "Postcolonial Feminism's Reinscription of Diasporic Female Identity," Musarrat Shameem states that when women are homogenous in their differing experiences, it is usually rooted in the notions of a "shared oppression" but that this proves problematic because homogenizing women in a single group overlooks them as "material subjects of their own history" (30). Shameem argues that the universal sisterhood that the second wave of feminism promotes works solely in the interests of Western women. In response to this universalizing, she contends that "the historically specific material reality of women brings forth the importance of particular local contexts in their identity formation" (Shameem 30).

Following this broad contextual setting, my essay uses *Brown Girls* as a seminal piece of fiction to highlight this plurality of differences that comes to the fore through a historical and cultural analysis of Andreades's "brown girls." My essay talks about the group of "brown women" Andreades represents in her book while noting that these specificities cannot be generalized to all "brown girls" and their struggles. The way that Andreades groups the women into a plural narrator reminds us that it can be problematic to imagine that an Indian American woman would face the same challenges as a Filipino American woman. Hence, my paper discusses and points to the South Asian diaspora, which, as I will argue, are where a few of the author's references come from, and these will be discussed below. It is important to note that the examples used in this essay are of certain cultures and practices that shed light on a few universal themes on identity. An analysis on the postcolonial diasporic subject such as this, however, leaves room for individual differences that vary across cultures that are not talked about in this essay and neither specified in the novel.

Especially important in my analysis will be how the expectations for what makes a 'good' woman produce restlessness, trauma, and conformity in the characters. These responses ultimately influence the characters' understandings of themselves and of feminism as a movement in American society. I argue that this restlessness, in particular, results from a broader cultural and historical association with colonial, racialized, and gendered subjection where expectations placed on women produce a trauma that leads them to conform to an ideal of a 'perfect' wife. Grappling with these expectations ultimately produces unsustainable restlessness within them.

RACIAL STEREOTYPES IN “LUNCHROOM”

Chris Weedon, in her book titled, *Identity and Cultures*, focuses on history, nation, and identity. She argues that in societies with more than one ethnic group, “dominant versions of history and culture” work to silence and stereotype, making those minorities who fall outside of “hegemonic narratives” invisible (Weedon 35). The belief in racial hierarchy behind the nineteenth century’s ‘white man’s burden,’ has not disappeared in the modern era. Andreades, at various points in her novel, points to this belief. For example, the girls are constantly reminded of their differences via their skin tone, their names, and their looks, and this adds to the racist stereotypical view that “brown people” are inferior. In the chapter, “Lunchroom,” one of the girls is bullied: “*Why don’t you shut the fuck up, Joseph Justin O’Brien says to our friend Trish, and go back to the projects you came from? We deliberate whether or not to take matters into our own hands and beat the shit out of Joseph Justin O’Brien because would the lunch ladies really understand if we told them what he said? Would they even care?*” (Andreades 12).

In *Identity and Cultures*, Weedon notes the ‘emotional legitimacy’ of ethnic and national identities and seeing one’s subjectivity in the context of a culture that is not their own (25). In this instance in Andreades’s novel, the sentences uttered by Joseph in the lunchroom scene and the girls’ reaction to them show the emotional legitimacy of the “brown girls’” navigation of their place in American society. What would complaining to the lunch lady really do? Who should they go to for help? These deliberations in the minds of the “brown girls” show their everyday struggles: dealing with racism, guilt, and feelings of inferiority inside and outside of school.

RACIAL STEREOTYPES IN “GIRLS LIKE YOU”

In the chapter “Girls Like You,” “brown girls” are also stereotyped, this time into being the “kind of girls who steal.” They visit a boutique and as they are trying out clothes in the dressing room, the manager pounds on the door,

We are interrupted by a pounding on our dressing room doors. An angry voice claiming to be the manager. *What are you girls doing there?* The doorknob jangles. *You better not be stealing anything!* She shouts. *I know what girls like you do!* (Girls like us?) *Come out! Right now!* Startled, we fumble to tug our jeans over our legs, which are in need of moisturizer (Andreades 22).

Here, another sort of racial dominance is evident, where the girls are surprised and scared to hear the manager's words 'girls like us' in accusing them of committing theft in the store. The narrator goes on to explain how small their purses are, that "they carry nothing more than quarters for our bus rides home, cell phones passed down from sisters, and one carefully folded twenty-dollar bill—our hard-earned babysitting cash—to shop" (Andreades 23). Similar to theorist Franz Fanon's argument about the attitudes of the white man that create negative connotations of the Black identity and themselves, the girls are subjected to an inferiority that causes the author to recall how humbly these girls have lived in the city. Despite their innocence as thirteen-year-old girls who do not have a clue as to what "girls like them" do and why they would steal, the girls are reminded at this moment that this stereotype and inferiority is yet another part and parcel of their identity in this nation. This instance additionally points to how second wave feminist movements tend to universalize the multiplicity of experience by showing how all "brown girls" are stereotyped into looking like thieves. Second wave feminism does not account for the diverse experiences and struggles of "brown women" across the world: they are all stereotyped as "girls like them."

CULTURAL STEREOTYPES OF THE COLONIZED WOMAN IN "OUR MOTHER'S COMMANDMENTS" AND "SHADOWS"

Throughout the novel, the "brown girls" constantly affirm a sense of dutifulness to how a 'good' woman should be in their culture, and this conflicts with their sense of living in American society that is characterized as the Land of Opportunity. Their mothers spare no second in warning the girls that straying from this dutifulness will result in punishment and disappointment:

Command #1

You should not be a troublesome girl...you shall be a good girl (Andreades 66).

Karen Helene Halvorsen in her essay, "The Vassreddy Succession Dispute: Female Agency under the Company Raj—An Exploration of South Indian Womanhood," focuses on Hindu women in the colonial era as "symbols of tradition." Through her example of the model Hindu wife represented by the character Sita from the popular epic, *The Ramayana*, Halvorsen illustrates the perfect wife as selfless, devoted, and sexually faithful (19). She further goes on to state that the significance of the Hindu woman revolved around her role as the wife, which was the focus of all Hindu mythology. The ideal woman was the symbol of happiness and prosperity for the husband and the

family (Halvorsen 19). In the novel, *Andreades*, although speaking as a collective voice, implicitly takes reference from the expectations placed on a traditional Indian wife. In “Our Mother’s Commandments,” *Andreades* mentions Aarti in her footnotes as one of the “brown girls.” Aarti is a Hindu name meaning “love for God,” and through this parallel, *Andreades* pulls references from the expectations placed on Hindu women.

In *Brown Girls*, the emphasis on being a good woman is expressed at multiple points by the author. Before marriage, the girls are coerced by the parents to marry white men to which they don’t resist. In the chapter, “Our Mother’s Commandments,” the mothers list a number of rules that the girls have to adhere to. This ties back to the concept of the ideal woman as she is expected to be the perfect obedient daughter who can do no wrong. In the chapter “Shadows,” when they are married to the white men, they are trapped in a constant state of panic, thinking over and over again about their past lovers. The feelings of trauma and restlessness as talked about earlier are depicted in this particular scene when they constantly fight between their real desires (the “brown boys”) and their “expected” conformity to their husbands,

No one can say we do not love our husbands because we do. We are good wives. Close your eyes, our husbands say. We do. We obey. Feel their lips on our necks, stomachs, hips, between our legs. But when we close our eyes, what comes to mind is not our husband’s faces. But his face. Brown boys, the ones we know and left behind. Faces etched into our minds. Panic—Open your eyes, hurry! Good wives. We are good wives (*Andreades* 157).

Lili Shi and Yadira Perez Hazel in their article titled “Locating Feminism in Asian Diasporas,” talk about diaspora criticism in literature, where literary scholars highlight that the mother-daughter narrative—in which “the daughter inherits trauma from her mother”—is a common topic in fiction about Asian diasporas (23). Interestingly, they argue through the scholar Sila Casinelli’s essay in which he “recontextualizes the novel’s diasporic political intimacies through gender and sexuality” as responses to colonialism (Shi & Hazel 23). Gender, they argue, is used as a tool of resistance in inquiry. This is done to better understand diasporic lives. Similarly, *Brown Girls* uses the trope of the mother-daughter conflict to talk about cultural expectations held on women but to center their ambition and empowerment in a foreign land, when, in the final chapters, they hope for their daughters to become strong, spirited women. The “brown girls” want to give their daughters strength and make them recognize their footing in both their ancestral home and their home in America. They want to end the

generational trauma that was passed down from their mothers: “Do they know that everything that’s part of us is also part of them?” (Andreades 194).

WHITENESS AND CHASING THE AMERICAN DREAM IN “EVERYTHING WE EVER WANTED”

With the expectations placed on the “brown girls” by the mothers in “Our Mother’s Commandments,” the significance of marrying a white man is further explored in the novel. In the girls’ exploration of romantic relationships, whiteness is portrayed as a prize. It functions as a means of validation for the “brown girls,” pointing to an insecurity they sense within themselves. Possessing the white man is a prize both earned and encouraged. Speaking to their parents about “brown boys,” the girls recount, “*It’s not that we’re racist, our parents say. Then what is it? We ask. It’s just. We don’t want you dating those kinds of boys. Which kinds of boys? We say, pressing them to be specific, although we already know which ‘kinds’ they’re referring to*” (Andreades 51 emphasis in original). A few pages later, the “brown girls” reflect on dating. Andreades writes, “Seventeen. White boys touch our skin. Beautiful, they say. Together, we lie on Central Park’s springy grass and ride rented bikes across the fart-smelling East River. Just to be near them feels like we are coveting something precious (diamonds that now belong to us)” (Andreades 54).

The narrator depicts the white boys as “diamonds” in the above quote. The obsession with whiteness finds its roots in postcolonialism. The American Dream with its emphasis on climbing the social ladder and achieving the highest aspirations is tied to whiteness as a cultural norm in Western society. The “brown girls” in the novel are desperate about gaining this success, whether it may be in the form of academic achievement or marrying a white man. Winning these ‘trophy’ are encouraged by the “brown parents” as they move to the Promised Land to avail opportunities and force their children to do the same. Alfred J. Lopez in his book, *Postcolonial Whiteness: A Critical Reader on Race and Empire*, explains,

The idea of whiteness as a cultural aesthetic norm combines with the idea of whiteness as a desirable and even necessary trait for colonized subjects who wish to achieve class mobility and financial success in a colonized (or formerly colonized) society. This tandem of whiteness as both aesthetically desirable and pragmatically necessary begins to be exposed as a product of the so-called civilizing mission of colonialism (Lopez 17).

In Lopez’s terms, the colonial subject hopes for “social and material advancement” (18). He argues that the colonial subject begins to subdue

their own cultural beliefs and values in order to be accepted in white society (Lopez 18). Andreades illustrates this when the “brown girls” go to meet their white lovers’ families who interrogate them because they are ‘not white.’ In the following quote, the girls nod in agreement with the white families who pass stereotypical comments about their home country, just to be accepted.

Because some of us are desperate to be accepted by their [white] families, thus, extremely impressionable (they could tell us to jump off the Verrazano and we’d do it; they could tell us Christ’s Second Coming was tomorrow, and we’d repent all our sins) - we nod vehemently in agreement, quick to forget our own undocumented loved ones in Queens (Andreades 57).

Through a historical lens, whiteness has always been viewed as the cultural norm and the standard to which the colonial subject should aspire to in order to be considered ‘worthy’ in American society. This is why the “brown girls”’ feelings of restlessness once again come to the fore in the chapters as in their pursuit of love and success, their identities are laden with anguish of not knowing where they belong and feeling like outsiders in someone else’s culture, all the while trying to fight a perpetual emptiness.

THE DIASPORIC SUBJECT’S SENSE OF HOME IN *BROWN GIRLS*

The “brown girls”’ sense of identity is linked to what they perceive as their home: the motherland that houses their roots and culture and the American city that reminds them daily of their differences. The diasporic concept of the home thus emerges as an importantly ambiguous theme in the novel. Looking particularly at the Indian diaspora, Chandrima Karmakar in her article, “The Conundrum of ‘Home’ in the Literature of the Indian Diaspora: An Interpretive Analysis,” states that diasporic Indians live within two spaces: their home in America and their motherland (81). Referring to Homi Bhabha’s book, *The Location of Culture*, where the theorist states that there is an ‘interstitial space’ between the diaspora’s two nations, Karmakar argues that a diaspora is a “condition” in which this interstitial space is occupied by the immigrant in the place that they leave and the place they live (81). Following Bhabha’s argument, she states, “the diasporics are required to identify the gray area between host country and India, between two lifestyles and cultures, and accept that as ‘home’ (Karmakar 81). She echoes author Bharti Mukherjee’s words, “the price that the immigrant willingly pays, and that the exile avoids, is the trauma of self transformation” (Karmakar 81).

The “brown girls” are constantly pondering the “ancestral land” or home that their families have always been referring to. When some of the

girls visit their motherland for the first time, they uncover the most important feeling attached to home that they know—nostalgia. Karmakar argues that the concept of home differs between various generational diasporas. For the first-generation immigrant, it is essentially nostalgia that keeps them tied to their homeland, which is evident in the passage below. “Memories,” “family stories,” and “old photographs,” help to keep this nostalgia alive:

When we set foot in the countries our families always referred to as *home*, we’re overcome with the realization that we only know these places in theory – a patchwork of memories, family stories, old photographs, Facebook research on cousins we’d forgotten, news articles, and Hollywood movies where all grit is, in fact, scrubbed clean (Andreades 123).

For the second-generation diasporic subjects, they possess little contact with their homeland but attempt to explore their roots. Karmakar states, “there is a sense of disjunction that persists among the second- and third generation diasporics. Their lives are imbued with gaps which catalyze their desire to trace their ‘roots.’ It also helps them relate to their parents’ past” (82). The second-generation immigrants, such as the “brown girls,” are unaware of their cultural roots, and they see them through a ‘mirage’ created by their parents. Karmakar provides a reference to Benedict Anderson’s famous book *Imagined Communities* that explains that through a diaspora’s perspective, the motherland is not just a nation but a socially constructed imagined community. After the colonial period, immigrants who shared the same culture and customs identified with those who share the same past. Just as in the case of the “brown girls,” they trace their roots back to a place that shares a similar culture. Their idea of two homes is based on a home that they leave behind and the one that they call now, that has essentially brought them together.

V.S. Naipaul, a postcolonial novelist, deems the home as a place to “anchor oneself” (82). Karmakar argues that for some in the Indian diaspora, “engaging with the idea of ‘home’ and ‘roots’ is a manifestation of the inner dilemma they have faced over the years” (82). Many authors writing in the same genre and who have been writing about Indian diasporas for a long time have conceptualized the home as a response to the alienation, identity crisis and displacement they feel in the foreign country. The “brown girls” say, “We leave, we leave, we leave. We always leave. It is in our blood to leave. But perhaps it’s also in our blood to return. Why did we ever believe home could only be one place? When existing in these bodies means holding many worlds within us. At last, we see” (Andreades 137). Perhaps to the “brown girls,” it signals a chance for them to come to terms with their racial identity

that permeates a rich culture and history that could only be realized when they journeyed to their homeland. In the novel's context, the home becomes essential in understanding the "brown girls" Americanness, privilege, heritage, and a yearning to meet their 'own kind.' In doing so, they experience profound feelings of an identity finally recognized—that they are "the sum of many identities, many histories, at once" (Andreades 132). The "brown girl" thus articulates her own place in the world, and this is informed by a historico-cultural past. "At last, we see" also points to their recognition and acknowledgement of what a home means and what they've been able to accomplish living in a diasporic position. It could also point to a multiplicity of identities.

CULTURAL HYBRIDITY IN *BROWN GIRLS*—A RESISTANCE TO HEGEMONY

In postcolonial studies, cultural hybridity "constitutes the effort to maintain a sense of balance among practices, values, and customs of two or more different cultures" (Bhabha). The theory of cultural hybridization is discussed among scholars to identify diasporic negotiation of identity in works of fiction and media. For self-identification, women search for a rooted sense of place through cultural hybridity. Weedon sheds light on several women writers of color who have written to "redefine hegemonic versions of women's 'Otherness'" (117). Gloria Anzaldúa and Homi Bhabha have made use of the theory of hybridity to talk about a negotiation of a third space that makes it possible to "reshape" dominant hierarchies and construct a new identity. The "brown girls" engage in a process of negotiation and exploration to create that hybridity. The many encounters the "brown girls" have in the book actively reshape and reimagine an identity where the girls attempt to resist domination. Weedon points out that "in much British discourse, this construction of the Asian community is characterized by its victim status—victim often not only of white racism but of a set of so-called traditional norms and values" (125). This perception is true in American discourse as well. *Brown Girls* offers a recognition of the two worlds that the protagonists are caught in but nonetheless come to terms with a powerful feminine identity that is strong and ambitious. Recognizing this is how they negotiate their feminism as they come of age and know that their children will have to face the same generational trauma:

Our daughters, our daughters, who don't yet know this world, but are filled with a spirit that cannot be tamed. They are three, four, five, seven-and-a-half years old. Who possesses the power to snap us in

two. Our brown girls. Strong enough for life itself. Or so we hope. We hope, and that is all we can do (Andreades 194).

It is this very resistance and empowerment that challenges the hegemonic, racist and ethnocentric otherness of the diasporas, to make way for a strong multicultural feminist identity.

CONCLUSION

These analyses help to illustrate the experiences of a diasporic female postcolonial subject and the challenges she faces as a “brown girl” in America, as the racialized, stereotypical, culturally oriented and insecure aspects of the diasporic identity come to the fore. Through this analysis, we learn how colonialism attaches tradition to the woman and puts expectations on her to be ‘good’ no matter what. The “brown girls” negotiate these expectations, alongside their historical roots and understanding of ‘home,’ into a third space through which they find a stronger feminist identity. This analysis further shows how postcolonial feminism acts as an inquirer into the historical and cultural specificities of the “brown woman,” which vastly emerge from imperialist narratives and colonial history. Reading contemporary stories alongside theoretical critiques of these imperialist narratives and colonial histories helps us include, understand, and capture the differences and challenges of women of color, steps which are necessary for an inclusive women’s movement.

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