

Asian Girls in Western Worlds:
An Analysis of the White Gaze and Asian-Canadian Girlhood

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Introduction

As a third-generation Asian woman living in Canada, I am all too familiar with the influence of Whiteness and the process of racialization on teenage girlhood. While it seemed evident to myself and my Asian peers that the prioritization of Whiteness (reflected in a Western culture of White hegemony) had lasting impacts on our teenage identity formation, there was a lack of scholarship explicitly researching the experience of teenage girls of colour. This gap in the literature led me to apply theories of the White gaze and gendered racial socialization to more popular representations of racialized girlhood. Under this framework, this paper will examine the ways in which Asian-Canadian teenage girls navigate the boundaries around race and belonging by drawing from both Pooja's experience in *White Elephant* alongside personal and anecdotal examples. Thus, in situating literary theories of racialization in popular and personal depictions of the Asian teenage experience, this paper illustrates the pervasive nature of the White gaze, and its ability to police racialized girls in Western worlds.

The Literature

In exploring the literature, I first want to engage with the more classical theories of race relations and its implications for engaging in multi-generational racial research. In particular, theorist Frantz Fanon explores his concept of a "racial epidermal schema" within his work *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952/2008, p. 84). In this framework, Fanon (1952/2008) theorizes how racialized individuals become aware of their bodies within dominant White social orders through their realization of how they "[occupy] space" (p. 84). Under this notion of occupying a White space as a racialized person, the concept of the "White gaze" comes into play by "permitting and/or limiting the very existence of racialized bodies" (Fang et al., 2023, p. 3). While this framework was historically developed to examine the Black experience in White dominated

spaces, it can further be applied to the experiences of multi-generation Asians existing in Western societies. Under this gaze, the bodies of Asian individuals are policed, whether explicit or implicit, in such a way that draws notable difference. It presents Whiteness as the ideal and renders those who fall outside this norm inferior, therefore offering a distinct form of socialization for racialized communities (Aujla, 2000).

Most of the existing scholarship I found regarding this process of racialization examines either colonial or postcolonial periods as explored by Fanon, or analyzes the experience of first-generation immigrants settling in Western states. Moreover, much academic research understands childhood and adolescence to be “racially neutral universes” (Rajiva, 2006, p. 170), highlighting a gap in the literature. However, it is equally important to explore the ways in which the White gaze affects racialized individuals beyond traditional colonial oppression or more explicit forms of racial discrimination. In particular, this gaze is embedded within the Western beauty ideal which directly influences racialized communities across Western societies (Aujla, 2000). Notably, the Western beauty ideal and the ways in which this gaze of Whiteness affects the socialization of Asian-Canadian youth offers an alternative perspective to how racism can manifest, as mentioned above, both explicitly and implicitly. It becomes a critical part of girlhood as racialization directly impacts a “crucial stage of identity formation” (Rajiva, 2006, p. 166), with youth having to navigate existing teenage concepts of ‘fitting in’ while under the Western ideal of Whiteness. Specifically, scholar Mythili Rajiva explores the concept of boundary formation as second generation South Asian girls engage in a process of “identifying, policing and/or negotiating the boundaries around belonging”, as they experience girlhood under a structure of Whiteness. Within her research, Rajiva (2006) examined the different ways South Asian teenage girls interacted with these boundaries around race and belonging, with interviewees

Rose describing her experience with explicit racial slurs in her youth. This explicit form of racism led Rose to recognize that “in order to belong to mainstream peer culture, she must deny her South Asianness” (Rajiva, 2006, p. 173), therefore illustrating how explicit forms of racism can impact their sense of belonging.

On the other hand, more subtle, implicit interactions with race may influence teenage girls of colour equally. For instance, 17 year old Sarah depicts the feeling of wanting to fit in with the popular group in high school and the experience of obtaining romantic attention from White boys for the first time (Rajiva, 2006). She further explores her experience of belonging to a predominantly White friend group, and describes a time where she observed how all the White boys “would go crazy over...a typical beautiful White girl” despite her unfavourable personality (Rajiva, 2006, p. 175). Through Sarah’s experience, we see how she circumvented the boundary of race by aligning herself with the notion of popularity and seemingly overcoming her racial difference. However, even within this access to popularity and peer acceptance, she still felt othered, especially with regard to dating White boys. In this, the White gaze seeps into Sarah’s experience of dating through the prevalence of Western beauty standards and the construction of the “ideal girl,” who is still presented in racially hegemonic terms” (Rajiva, 2006, p. 175). Here, the process of “*gendered racial socialization*” (Ahn et al., 2022, p. 130) presents itself through the implicit messages Sarah received regarding the “ideal girl”, in addition to her perceived circumvention of racial difference through her proximity to popularity and Whiteness. As a result, we see how classical theories of the White gaze are situated within the teenage experiences of Asian-Canadian girlhood, despite limited scholarship on the matter.

Pooja's Experience

To illustrate some of the ways in which the White gaze directly influences Asian-Canadian youth, the film *White Elephant* (2022) offers a meaningful portrayal of the direct and indirect forms of racialization experienced by teenage girls of colour. Notably, the main character Pooja is a second generation South Asian teenager who grapples with the experience of liking a White boy for the first time. While she experiences a multitude of explicit racial slurs throughout the film (11:20, 25:19, 26:45), I want to highlight how more implicit forms of racialization impact Pooja's identity formation. Specifically, when Pooja becomes interested in a White boy named Trevor, she begins to make changes to her appearance by getting blonde highlights and wearing coloured contacts (25:38). Additionally, she shortens her name to "Ja", seemingly making it easier for Trevor and his White friends to pronounce (17:56). These changes reflect an increased proximity to Whiteness through the alteration of her more ethnic characteristics, such as her natural hair and eye colour, and her South Asian name. In this, Pooja's actions further portray Rajiva (2006)'s analysis on the boundaries surrounding race and belonging, as she distances herself from her "South Asianness" (p. 173) in order to fit in with mainstream peer culture. Within this boundary formation, we see Pooja's "internalization of White beauty ideals" (Ahn et al., 2022, p. 132) through her blonde highlights and coloured contacts, which further reinforces the influence of the White gaze. From this, Pooja experiences the pressure of adhering to constructions of desire that prioritize White characteristics, and as a result, receives direct social messaging that impacts her identity formation as a South Asian-Canadian teenage girl (Aujla, 2000).

However, much like Sarah's experience above, Pooja's conformity to mainstream culture fails to grant her "ideal girl" status as Trevor's friends criticize his decision to date her over his

stereotypically beautiful White ex-girlfriend (26:45). From this, we see how despite Pooja's assimilation to Western society, her existence continues to be policed and restricted through Trevor's friends' racialized dismissal of her, and the subsequent physical attack from his ex-girlfriend (37:39). Here, the White gaze renders Pooja "visible when [she goes] beyond the boundaries of Whiteness" by attempting to date Trevor, which angers his White social circle and leads them to physically reinforce the "White dominant racial order" through their attack (Fang et al., 2023, p. 3). Thus, we see how the implicit messages regarding Western beauty ideals and White peer/romantic acceptance directly influenced Pooja's identity formation and created a distinct form of teenage girlhood. Likewise, it further reflects the process of gendered racial socialization (Ahn et al., 2022) as Pooja learns that her racialized identity will forever restrict her ability to obtain "ideal girl" status since its conception is based on hegemonic Whiteness (Rajiva, 2006).

Personal Connections

Following this examination of Pooja's experience in *White Elephant*, I wish to further this discussion by centering both personal and anecdotal experiences regarding more implicit interactions with racialization in more romanticized spaces. In particular, I want to explore specific microaggressions within the framework of gendered racial socialization that express more subtle discriminatory messages. These microaggressions against Asian women and girls can include "expectations of submissiveness, fetishism, [...] and assumption of a universal appearance" and are portrayed through both indirect and direct forms of discriminatory messages (Ahn et al., 2022, p. 131). For instance, gendered racial microaggressions occurred when a Chinese friend of mine was approached by a White man who opened the conversation with "Ni hao" (meaning hello in Mandarin Chinese). Although she was Chinese, the man had no way of

confirming her ethnicity, nor did he consider which dialect she spoke or if she spoke the language at all, illustrating the assumption of a universal ‘Asian’ appearance. Likewise, when a White man chose to compliment my appearance using Chinese characters rather than in English, he relied on this assumption of universality by mindlessly assuming both my ethnicity and my linguistic ability.

In addition to these assumptions that treat East Asian individuals as a homogeneous group, both of these experiences highlight more implicit depictions of fetishization that make racialized girls feel uncomfortable, without being able to exactly pinpoint the offense committed. This inherent discomfort is reflective of the “‘casual’ objectification of Asian bodies”, where these microaggressive comments are dealt in such a “casual” way that they often go “unnoticed and unvoiced” (Fang et al., 2022, p. 7). Under this framework, I argue that the White man’s use of the Chinese language to achieve or portray some form of romantic interest, inherently relies on an orientalist view of Asian girls as ‘different’ or ‘exotic’. This notion completely dismisses the existence of multi-generational Asians who, despite being Canadian, will never be “quite Canadian enough, never quite white enough” thereby “remain[ing] ‘others’ in their own land” (Aujla, 2000, p. 2). It also reinforces the persistence of the White gaze through the policing of racialized Asian bodies, in which White society restricts the ability of Asian girls to move beyond the ethnicized category created for them (Fang et al., 2023).

Moreover, these experiences further examine the concept of racialized “aesthetic privilege” (Rajiva, 2006, p. 175) within Asian diaspora, being that both myself and my friend are more light skinned East Asian girls who become partially absolved from the colourism potentially faced by South Asian individuals. Within this structure, Rajiva (2006) illustrates the process of “bargaining with racism” whereby certain girls of colour “perform eroticized

representations within a racialized economy of desire” (p. 175). Here, they are able to circumvent more traditional forms of oppression and explicit racial discrimination by “bargaining with racism” through their perceived aesthetic privilege. However, as examined above, this privilege fails to absolve them of the gendered racial microaggressions that fetishize Asian girls and take interest in their constructed ‘difference’. As such, we observe how the White gaze equally bars racialized girls’ access to “ideal girl” status regardless of “aesthetic privilege” under the structure of White hegemony.

Conclusion

In reflecting upon the distinct gendered racial socialization experienced by Asian teenage girls, it is important to recognize how receiving these messages during crucial stages of identity formation deeply affects their mental health. Specifically, gendered racial socialization under the White gaze influences the self-perception of Asian girls, through social messaging that renders them inferior to their White counterparts. In particular, this paper explored the specific influence of Western beauty standards that make Asian girls feel that “their physical characteristics are less beautiful and undesirable” compared to White characteristics (Aujla, 2000, p. 7). From this construction gives rise to the “ideal girl”, founded within White hegemonic beauty standards that police the existence of racialized girls. By situating these concepts in relation to Pooja’s experience in *White Elephant* and my own personal and anecdotal experiences, this paper has illustrated how the “ideal girl” will always exclude racialized women regardless of their mainstream culture conformity and/or aesthetic privilege. Thus, under the pervasive dominance of the White gaze, it becomes clear that Asian teenage girls face a set of distinct challenges as they navigate the boundaries of race and belonging in their racialized experience of girlhood.

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