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Book Review Essay: Good Girls Marry Doctors: South Asian American Daughters on Obedience and Rebellion¹

Khadijah Kanji²

Good Girls Marry Doctors: South Asian American Daughters on Obedience and Rebellion (2016) is an anthology of short non-fictional personal-narrative essays by US/Canada-located diasporic women 'desis' – defined in the book as “*people or objects from the South Asian countries, which include: Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka*” (Bhattacharya, 2016). It is compiled and edited by Piyali Bhattacharya.

Excluding the Foreword (by Tarfia Faizullah) and Introduction (by Piyali Bhattacharya), there are a total of 26 essays, authored by those with a common 'diasporic desi womanhood' but who are otherwise diverse in terms of profession, age, linguistic/ethnic/geographical background, location, religion, birthplace, sexuality, gender expression, and relationship to the 'homeland'. The jacket cover pitches the collection as a series of “*honest stories – emotional and joyous, sorrowful and humorous*”, that “*dig into difficult truths*” (Bhattacharya, 2016). Issues covered include: parental relationships (fraught, loving, rebellious, abandoned, bereaved); physical and emotional abuse; gendered and other expectations (and their violation); activism; romance, partnership and marriage; pregnancy and motherhood; sexuality and desire; homophobia; bodily self-image (particularly the Euro-normative beauty standards that undermine it); religiosity; academics and careers; being 'different' in a White world; immigration; and relationships to the 'back home' and to the diasporic community.

Diasporic desi women raised in North America, like me, are immersed in a society normalizing of, catered to, and exalting of White bodies, histories, values, and norms. As such, we have come into being with an acute sense of racial self-consciousness. Who we are has always been defined in relation to a norm against which we negatively deviate. I am therefore always thrilled to consume content published by and for someone like me – me in terms of skin colour, colonial history, and immigration trajectory. But this diasporic-engendered racial self-consciousness has also sourced my misgivings about the anthology, having made me sensitive to the reproduction of racism in even the most seemingly benign products - indeed, even in those that are pleasurable to me.

Culture versus race

The premise of this anthology – the rationale for including this particular array of voices – is that there is some sort of shared reality associated with 'desi woman-ness'. And indeed – as people racialized as Brown, and gendered as women/femme, we are processed similarly within the White European settler-colonial patriarchal and racialized capitalist nationalist spaces of US and

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Canada. Desi woman-ness is relevant towards our experience because we are similarly subject to interacting forms of anti-Brown racism and patriarchy. This collection, however, does *not* position itself as a drop box of anecdotes which testify to this form of gendered racialization.

The titular narrative (i.e., that good girls marry doctors) references a stereotype associated with idealized desi womanhood that, in turn, reflects upon desi systems of human valuation. Specifically, gendered objects are as worthy as they are 'good' – a goodness secured through submission to heterosexual, reproductive, legally-authorized, and socially-sanctioned monogamy, and amplified through a social status derived from professional and educational attainment. Thus, what unites these diverse authors sufficiently so that a collection of their stories has discursive continuity – so they belong alongside one another in an anthology – is a common antagonist. This collective adversary is not, apparently, racism or patriarchy but, rather, 'culture' – whatever it is about desi-ness which mandates us to be 'good girls who marry doctors.'

The problem with “culture”

According to cultural theorist Stuart Hall, there exists “*no single, unproblematic definition of 'culture'*” (in Park, 2005, p. 13). The definitional slipperiness of culture, combined with its 'common sense'-ness, points to its status as hegemonic. That we all know intuitively what culture is, yet cannot quite *articulate* this knowledge, reflects the concept's uncontested claim on Truth. “*The essential existence of culture is taken for granted*”, as social work academic Yoosun Park (2005, p. 15) explains - even when it cannot be defined.

During my master's research on queer subjectivity in the Toronto South Asian diaspora, I interviewed Arjun, a recent immigrant, who told me how: “*In India, I would say I'm ...Mumbaikar.... South Asian is a term I came to know here. Even the term Brown. So like Brown? What's up with that?*” (in Kanji, 2017, p. 56). Arjun reminded me that my Brownness is not an inherent quality but, instead, a function of my socio-political situatedness. I am only Brown in relation to White - in a context where Whiteness is norm, and Brownness marks my body/subjectivity as Other.

'Culture' obscures the contingency of racial identity, by ascribing a coherent and pre-existing personality to Brownness, South Asian-ness, and other equivalent racial groupings. In this way, it reifies - renders pre-existing, objective, universal, and historical - a racial category produced through the enforcement of power. Through this exercise, it “*is forgotten that these ... [cultural categories] are themselves the constructs of colonial — orientalist and racist — discourses*” (Bannerji, 2000, p.9).

As anthropologist Renato Rosaldo puts it: “*the more power one has, the less culture one enjoys, and the more culture one has, the less power one wields*” (in Park, 2005, p. 22). Cultural groupings are generated through racial processes and duplicate the categorical boundaries of race. Yet, culture makes itself palatable by evacuating itself of an *acknowledgement* of power. Indeed, the externally directed accusations inherent in the invocation of race do not make their way into culture, which directs its gaze internally. As such, desi women aren't raced and gendered victims of a White-supremacist and patriarchal world but, rather, *cultural* victims of a *Brown* one, where they suffer the imperative to be 'good girls who marry doctors. For this status-quo-appealing reason, “*'culture' ...has largely replaced the categories of race and ethnicity as the preferred trope of minority status*” (Park, 2005, p. 29).

This culture-narrative has been sufficiently furnished and diffused so that *Good Girls Marry Doctors* can - without invoking the word or even being actively conscious of the concept –

contain all the hallmarks of a product rooted in, and reproductive of, the problematic culture-framework. Importantly, this culture-issue is not manifest in any individual contribution. Taken as isolated artefacts, in fact, many are touching, hilarious, delightful and, even, reflect the authors' race-consciousness. Yet, because they are gathered under this anthology, each individual essay is then processed through the dominant discursive force of culture – one that is articulated right from the book's title. The following sections describe how culture works in this anthology to sanitize White supremacy, legitimize racial essentialism, and ultimately, justify racial outcomes.

Culture as deficit

As Yoosun Park (2005, p. 22) writes, "*culture* ... is a ...*descriptor for a deficit*". Deficient, indeed, as the anthology variously describes our culture as cruel, abusive, manipulative, dominating, uncouth, pesky, hypocritical, naive, rigid, invasive, and repressive. Desi-ness is, apparently, grounded in values of sexual prudishness, homophobia, patriarchy, superstition, religious dogmatism, ethnic intolerance, and obsession with status, appearance, capitalist achievement, marriage, and parenthood. We come to understand that through expectations of 'obedience' and 'honour', those who are subject to desi-dom remain locked up in an inter-generational cultural prison, thus arrested in their pursuit of a happy and self-actualized existence. As contributor Phiroozeh Petigara (2016, p. 152) writes, desi culture is a "*teeny tiny box I'm asked to squeeze myself into*".

Culture as obfuscator

The repressions and abuses depicted in these stories are not fabricated or exaggerated in service of this culture-narrative. The issue is that in their discursive processing, "*structural and ideological reasons for difference give place to a talk of immutable differences of ethnic cultures ... the focus shifts from processes of exclusion and marginalization to ethnic identities and their lack of adaptiveness*" (Bannerji, 2000, p. 18). Put otherwise, culture dominates as the explanatory variable for the authors' experiences, eliding the role of dynamic social forces that originate external to, and are perpetuated by and impact those beyond, the boundaries of the cultural group.

In the opening narrative, Tanzila Ahmed (2016) reflects on her father as not only abusive but irrational - as illustrated by his splurge on pre-emptive wedding jewelry for his daughters, even while he and his wife faced bankruptcy. Registering this story through the 'good girls marry doctors' paradigm has us attributing this behavior to a confluence of cultural norms and impulses – namely, an inexplicable obsession with marriage; and a household patriarchy that keeps men ignorant of domestic realities even as it delegates to them exclusive household purchasing power. In this discourse, financial ruin is the inevitable – and maybe even deserved - outcome of these cultured shortcomings.

Alternatively, we could read this story by reference to class, race, immigration status, and global patriarchy. These *non*-cultured interactive forces destine so many immigrants to working-class poverty, and expose them to novel indignities of racism, classism, and credentialism. Ultimately, disenfranchised, and displaced men are motivated to reclaim esteem through appeal to domestic patriarchy - and they are *empowered* to do so by an immigration system that makes women and children legally and financially dependent upon them.

Further, the spendthrift behavior that one might register as the failings of a culture-bound patriarch does, in fact, contain a coherent and even tender logic. Working to 'marry off' daughters

is one way of guaranteeing their financial security, ensuring they will not be destined to the precarity of their parents; and wedding jewelry is more than a decoration but an investment - in many cases, the only independent wealth a woman has access to.

In her anthological contribution, Leila Khan describes how “*as with most South Asian parents, financial security and upward social mobility for their children are major preoccupations*” (Khan 2016, pp 81-82). Culture-discourse decontextualizes this preoccupation – understanding it as an inherent desi quality untethered to the conditions of its deployment. My own desi grandfather instilled in us the importance of financial success, because “*no White person will respect you without money*”. Moving beyond the flattening explanation of culture, this ‘inherent’ desi quality becomes multi-dimensional - responsive, logical, and even poignant. Those who dream of something better for their children have to uproot and relocate to the Western states where wealth has been artificially hoarded. They must then contend with a racialized context in which they do not have equal economic access - but they must aspire to overcome this in order to socially-compensate for their racialized Otherness. No wonder they are so ‘preoccupied’.

The patriarchy, transphobia, homophobia, ethnic and religious intolerance that show up in these contributor stories are, too, hardly cultural quirks but the socio-political-legal remnants of European colonial rule – which imposed patriarchal systems of governance, regulated gender and sexual embodiment and expression, and fomented ethnic divisions based on the colonial imperative to ‘divide and conquer’. These forces are propelled today by global capitalist-engendered poverty and ongoing Western hegemony and influence. They are, also, still endemic to the Western contexts that seek to explain them away as the importations of cultural Others - as statistically documented by rates of femicide, domestic violence, gender and sexual pay gaps, queer homelessness, and transphobic, racist, and homophobic hate crimes.

This does not excuse the intolerances and abuses of our desi parents. However, it understands them as not the irrational product of an irrational culture, but the logical outcome of centuries of Western imperialism - a colonial meddling that, as queer non-binary author Alok Vaid-Menon (2014) puts it, has also “broken” our families. Further, these prejudices are not fait accompli, but in flux – shifting alongside the engagements and resistances of those who are impacted by, and impact, them.

Culture as civilizational banishment

Culturalization is an inherently violent practice. It requires assigning the various impulses, motivations, behaviors, values, and norms of a diverse range of people to a static and hypnotic force (i.e., culture) which saturates individual consciousness and plays puppeteer. As social work academics Chris Chapman and AJ Withers (2019) write: “*it involves subtracting purpose, responsibility, agency, or animacy from framings of how that person or “those people” function*” (p. 221).

Professor Mahmood Mamdani (2002) connects the application of culture-discourse to a Western imperialism justified by the need to ‘civilize’ racial Others: “*these people seem incapable of transforming their culture...the implication is that their only salvation lies, as always, in philanthropy, in being saved from the outside.*” (p. 767). *Good Girls Marry Doctors* activates this culture-narrative with respect to gender – a particularly salient register within the discourse of civilization.

Indeed, the perception that cultured Others are unusually patriarchal supplies significant fodder for their dehumanization. Through their construction as irrationally hateful and violent,

they are rendered unsalvageable, such that they can then be “*evicted from the universal and thus from civilization and progress.... violence may [then] be directed [at them] with impunity.*” (Razack, 2008, p. 21). Further, the figure of the ‘helpless cultured woman’ triggers the ‘white men saving brown women from brown men’ (Spivak, 1994) phenomenon – which manifests today in exercises of foreign violence, and domestic policy and practice that regulate and penalize cultured others based on the ‘benevolent’ mission to protect cultured women from cultured expressions of patriarchy.

That *Good Girls Marry Doctors* self-identifies as a gathering space for ‘rebellious’ desi women does not *undermine* the construction of cultured women as victims. On the contrary, “*the Escapee...who casts off the shackles of [cultured] patriarchy all by her Nancy Drew self*” (Kahf, 2011, p. 112) is written into utility. Indeed, just as the helpless cultural woman invites racial domination dressed up as ‘saving’, the cultural escapee testifies to the ‘universal’ desire to be free of one’s cultured burdens.

Culture as universalizing and sanitizing Whiteness

What remains uninterrogated in this culture-discourse is the ‘universal’ – the place of arrival for the culturally-freed escapee. As Yoosun Park (2005) explains, “*“culture” functions...as a referential demarcator measuring the distance these Others stand in relation to the Caucasian mainstream, inscribed in its turn as the “culture-free” norm.*” (p. 12) Put otherwise, what becomes invisibilized and universalized through the discourse of culture is, indeed, the *culture* of Whiteness.

When anthology contributor Neelanjana Bannerjee (2016) suggested that it is “*easy to rebel against your Indian parents for... their irrational fears and strictness...but what about when your father...admits to being human [by leaving his Indian wife for a blonde nurse that worked in his office]?*” (p. 30), she was betraying this false universalization of Whiteness - tethering the universal “human” and its impulses to the practice of extra-marital sex and desire for White women. Indeed, many of the anthology’s stories rotate around these ‘universal’ desires for ‘freedom’, ‘truth’, ‘agency’, ‘fulfillment’, ‘choice’, ‘privacy’, ‘individualism’ and ‘honesty’ – which these protagonists aspire towards through ‘resistance’, activities which transgress the boundaries of cultured permissibility. But as anthropologist Lila Abu-Lughod (1990) has written: “*resistances are...neither outside of nor independent from the systems of power*” (p. 42).

Sayantani DasGupta’s (2016) contribution, for example, describes one such resistance. Flipping the cultural script referenced in the anthology’s title, she suggests that ‘good girls’ don’t marry doctors, but *become* ones. In this formulation, the liberatory alternative to a culture-imposed gendered dependence is the direct inclusion of women in the workplace – a workplace administered under a capitalist system that distributes value according to race, gender, ability, and class, and which destines most people to desperate poverty. Unaccounted for in this formula are the violence’s that finance this gendered reconfiguration - migrant women who fill domestic care voids for working Western women are made legally precarious and thus economically and physically exploitable. This is what happens when ‘good girls’ become doctors under global imperialist capitalism.

Together, the stories presume the universal applicability of White norms and ideals, and, in so doing, effectively sanitize the context within which those norms are generated and practiced. Within this logic, we our aspirations orient towards full membership in this (White) society. So, when Ayesha Mattu (2016) expressed frustration over the common “*but where are you really*

from?" question; or when Mathangi Subramanian (2016) described America as a 'country of immigrants' – these authors were indexing their humanity to their social recognition as 'full Americans', a recognition premised upon the erasure of settler-colonial violence upon which this American is enabled.

This White-culture illusion of 'freedom' – the myth of universal access to personal liberation via the marketplace and membership in the American family - is integral to the functioning of White supremacist nationalist settler-colonial capitalism. It shapes our public relationships, as well as our intimate ones.

Several authors described rescuing their sexualities from the cultural grip of their families - opting for love marriages, refusing marriage, divorcing, or transgressing heterosexuality. However, the limitations imposed upon this culturally freed sexuality are erased. In an article for *the body is not an apology*, Caleb Luna (2018) writes powerfully about life as a 'fat, brown, femme' who is "singled" – i.e., "denied intimacy and care". While our desi cultures often impose overt restrictions on sex and romance, the sexual freedom available through the 'uncultured' norm is nonetheless distributed - and withheld - according to hierarchies of race, class, and ability. This denial of romantic love has *material* consequences – in a capitalist context, our liveability is often a function of our romantic desirability, dictating our likelihood of access to the logistical, financial, and emotional support required for survival.

From this perspective – one that directs a scrutinizing gaze at the culture of capitalist Whiteness – a desi orientation towards family-arranged, socially-validated, reproductive partnerships read less like an indisputable cultured limitation, and, more so, like an alternative way of organizing romance and domesticity – one which doesn't prioritize individual choice but which is, perhaps, well-suited towards economic security and community flourishing in the given context.

Culture as homogenizing

By constructing the diasporic desi woman as a coherent character whose life circumstances are propelled by common forces, our diverse realities are collapsed and, more accurately, subsumed under those of the most privileged. The book jacket cover, for example, contains several references to our 'model minority' status. As a diasporic desi woman who is Muslim, this doesn't capture my subjectification. Within the apparatus of Islamophobia, I am, in fact, a *hated* minority.

The homogenization of desi-ness does more than preclude recognition of how we are differently processed through Whiteness but, also, glosses over the tyrannies we exact upon one another. The most overt erasure of intra-desi violence is perpetrated in Nayomi Munaweera's (2016) submission, during which she reflects upon her romance with a Tamil boy, and the resulting conflicts within her diasporic Sinhalese community. Her rendering of the back-home context – described by her as a *war* between Tamils and Sinhalese, one in which *both parties* fund violence, and which has bred *mutual* misgivings – repackages relations of domination as ones of equitable dislike. In fact, the Sinhalese majority retain political control of Sri Lanka, and exert dominance over the Tamil people. As a result, the vast majority of North American diasporic Sri Lankans are Tamil – having immigrated, often as refugees, to escape their persecution and violence. In this context of Tamil oppression and minority Sinhalese presence in the US/Canada diaspora of Sri Lankans, the inclusion of a Sinhalese-authored narrative within a limited anthology of diasporic desi-ness – particularly one that effects the erasure of anti-Tamil violence – is perhaps illustrative of the collection's methodology.

The anthological premise of a shared sisterhood in desi-ness – one that extends between the upper-caste and lower caste/casteless, the Hindu and the Muslim, the Sinhalese, and the Tamil – is realistic only in so much as the violence within this ‘family’ can be erased. This is a task most effectively achieved through deputizing the most privileged desi women – those who aren’t exposed first-hand to the cracks and fissures within desi-ness, and who can situate themselves safely and comfortably within its folds - to speak on behalf of the rest of us.

Conclusion

Culture is a sophisticated vehicle for racism because it occupies the space of truth – incontestable, disinterested, and in fact, invisible. It can even be operationalized within ostensibly *anti-racist* initiatives – including a compilation of personal narratives by and for racialized women.

Indeed, the most compelling confirmations for racist discourse are sourced from ‘native informants’ – those who can personally avow racist stereotypes, while at the same time denying their racist nature. That a literary product by Brown women could reproduce anti-Brown racism isn’t shocking – native informants have forever acted as allies in colonial and imperial racial domination.

Their persuasiveness relies, in part, on the assertion that their position is a rebellious one. As the anthology editor writes in her Introductory remarks: “*to transgress is one thing, to talk about the transgression is another*” (Bhattacharya, 2016, p. ix). Presumably, then, the anthology contributors are engaging in a double mutiny.

But an expose on Brown culture is hardly rebellious. On the contrary, it is utterly *obedient* - in the service of a White supremacy that requires racial Others be rendered unsalvageable. What *is* rebellious, rather, is to refuse complicity in a discourse that makes us Brown, deems this Brownness deficient, and presents as our only alternative a conditional and limited access to Whiteness. In other words, being a ‘bad girl’ has nothing to do with marrying a doctor.

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