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Might As Well Be a Trophy Wife

As a woman, I am told that my opinions are not important. As a mixed woman, I am told that because I look “exotic,” that my entire existence is for male enjoyment, the oversexualization of my body and for bearing children. I am told that my looks are what are valued in this society – not my opinions. My intelligence is irrelevant because my family tells me that my looks will allow me to “catch” a successful husband. I was told what Shaunita Hampton was told, “If that whole college thing doesn’t work out, you’ll make a good housewife” (Hampton 3). I have grown up being told that I am lesser because even though I am capable of taking care of myself and providing for myself, I did not have to. Although I was not directly told that I did not need to have a career, it was something that could be left unsaid because my family’s snide and insinuating comments that I did not have to work hard said it all for them and what they thought of me. These comments tell me that because I am *mestiza*, I am considered “pretty” according to Filipino standards; I am told a man will only love me for my looks and disregard my intellect. I am silenced by the patriarchal system that overwhelms Filipino-American society.

Early on, I was taught that my intelligence was directly correlated to my looks. In Filipino culture, women are traditionally taught that they are supposed to be seen and not heard. This ideal is not perpetuated by just men in Filipino culture; women are strong constituents of

these patriarchal values as well. I am silenced by men and women in my culture who believe that men are more valuable than women. Women are told that they belong at home in the kitchen, taking care of the children, while men are told to go to work and provide for the family. Nico Blanco's mother had an experience similar to most Filipina women:

“My mom always avoids confronting the reason she keeps following my [father's] orders. She is afraid to damage her relationship with her husband and challenge the values she has grown up with. My mother's need to avoid the question shows that she does not realize that she is falling under this patriarchal oppression and that she feels powerless within the larger system” (3).

Filipina women are told to be fearful of their husbands because a man is the one who leads the family and makes the decisions even though they may not directly affect him. This is how Blanco's mother feels because of how both men and women in Filipino society are raised. Filipina women do not know any different because this is considered normal in traditional patriarchal values and it is looked down upon to think differently or do differently than what is taught to them as children.

My mother was an immigrant from the Philippines who was raised with traditional patriarchal values. When she immigrated to the United States, she came without her husband for the first year because he had not yet obtained citizenship. Thus, my mother was forced to unlearn the patriarchal ideals ingrained into her mind as a child and become the sole provider for my brother until her husband arrived from the Philippines. She experienced an isolation from male dominance in that year away from her husband and learned how to truly be independent and create a life for herself. It was difficult for her to “forget” the traditional values imposed on her because they were everything she had known and experienced in her life up until this point. She

struggled at first because she was used to having her husband around, but eventually became used to the idea of being able to provide for her family. She didn't need a man to survive and to take care of her; she was just as capable of taking care of herself, if not more capable of taking care of herself, than anyone else. She realized that women did not have to rely on men. The time my mother spent alone in this country shaped not only who she was, but also who I am.

My mother exemplifies exactly what is taught to Filipinas about men and marriage because she married my father, a *white* man. Linda Pierce, author of *Not Just My Closet*, states:

“There had always been an unspoken consensus that Mama, a Filipina of both Spanish and Tagalog descent had ‘married up...’ She had snagged a handsome, young, blonde-haired, blue-eyed American soldier near the end of World War II, and she was ‘lucky’ to get him because he was seven years younger and she was a widowed mother of two” (34).

My mother like Pierce's Mama was considered “lucky” because they were both older and had already been married to a Filipino man, with whom they had kids. Her family was happy because my mother had “married-up” and had mestiza child. She was following the colonialist ideas that were brought to the Philippines by Americans and Spanish. By the time my mother was raising me, she had been already divorced my siblings' father, decided that she didn't need a man to fulfill her needs and decided not to remarry after getting a divorce from, my father. This is not what her family had taught her; her prevalent Roman-Catholic and traditional values “strongly advise” against divorce. There is a stigma and a double-standard that surround women who want a divorce versus men who want a divorce. Women are considered undesirable if they are divorced, whereas it is normal for a man to get a divorce and remarry. Women in this culture are taught that they are replaceable by men. Despite these challenges, I was raised to value myself

and my own opinions because the society I have grown up in will not. I have spent my entire life trying to prove to my aunts, uncles, and grandmother that I am worthy and that I am just as respectable as a man – that I am just as capable of doing anything a man can do.

My mom raised me with the mentality that patriarchal values were irrelevant and that women can be as strong as men. She taught my sister and I that we didn't need a man to take care of us and that we should be able to provide for ourselves. However, I know that because of her religious and familial upbringing that she still believed that a man should be a provider for the family, albeit that he should not be the only one. Her conservative family believed differently though; our family is not progressive. In fact, they are deeply rooted in their cultural and religious upbringing.

In the cultural community that I have grown up in, I was told that I only exist for the pleasure of men and for the sake of bearing children. I was not “trained to be my own person; women are prepared to be the possessions of men, taking his name and bearing his children” (Hampton 4). Similarly to Hampton, I only serve the purpose of bearing children, specifically children who are *white*. My Filipino elders tell me that if I can marry a *white* man, I will be better off because “marrying a *white* man for Filipinas is a step up...[both] socially and economically” (Pierce 37). The only reason I am told to be studious in school is so that I can go to a place of higher education not to obtain a degree, but to find a successful *white* husband. My family embedded into me at a young age that if I was less vocal and more obedient, I too, would be able to marry a *white* man like my mother. I am told by my elders that my children will be “*more* beautiful, *more* precious, and *more* valuable” than my siblings’ because I am mestiza (Pierce 37). Often, I would get pulled aside by one of my aunts or uncles and they would spew destructive thoughts into my head: “You are so much prettier than your sister,” or “Wait until college to find

an educated *white* man” were comments I frequently heard at family gatherings. The idea that “white is right” is believed by Filipinos because of the colonialist ideas about skin color. White skin is seen as more sophisticated and more desirable than brown skin. My family’s justification for such prejudice is that the darker one’s skin color, the more physical labor they do. This is because if one has darker skin color, it is presumed that they spend more time out in the sun. Similarly, in American society, white-collar workers are considered more wealthy and of higher class than blue-collar workers.

Growing up, I was told by my family members that I didn’t need to be smart to be successful and that because I was mestiza, I would find someone to take care of me anyway. My grandmother taught me that I needed to always make sure I looked perfect so that I would be able to find a husband. She always made sure to put on her lipstick and told me that I should do the same because I never knew who I would meet that day. In “Mixed Opinion,” Miranda Stuart describes how “exotic” women are perpetuated as sexual objects by stating:

“The media plays an integral role in the exotification of multiracial women.

Representation is complicated in that there are many multiracial actresses, but they are usually made to be sexual objects. Not to mention the inherent racism and colorism of only depicting lighter-skinned women as sexual objects of desire” (Stuart 4).

Not only am I told by my family that being multiracial is beautiful, but I am told by the media. Multiracial women are told that they are beautiful for their “exotic” looks and are shown slinging off the arms of white men at award shows on television like a trendy, new accessory. My family jokes that because of my looks I could (and should) marry rich because of my looks, but I am not entirely sure that they are joking. I know that when they say that I should marry rich, it doesn’t necessarily just mean money, it meant a man with a higher social status –a *white* man.

I am told I will not have a career because I do not need one. The only careers my mom's side of the family said I should have were superficial like an actress or a model. Linda Pierce explains that this is something commonly said to girls who are mestiza:

“The virtues that afforded my mother success in Philippine beauty pageants were distinctly tied to the genes inherited from her blue-eyed American father...the news clippings described her best assets as having ‘mestiza beauty,’ and being ‘fair and lovely,’ and even ‘statuesque,’ towering over her Filipina costars at her staggering height of five foot four” (36).

I was told many of the things Pierce's mother was told: that I was tall, fair, and naturally beautiful because I am mestiza. I was told that I didn't have to be talented because I was lighter skinned. In the Philippines, life comes easily to you if you are mixed. Filipino culture perpetuates white supremacy because in the Philippines, the lighter your skin and the less Filipino you look, the higher your social class and the more money you have.

I have spent my entire existence fighting back against what patriarchal and colonialist values tell me I am supposed to be. When I was three, my sister, who was in high school at the time, was dating a boy named Jeremy, who was a darker-skinned Filipino. My grandmother, who was very prejudiced, told my sister that she didn't like her boyfriend and that my sister should find someone who is lighter-skinned. Because of this comment on his skin, I had grown up thinking that her boyfriend, Jeremy, was black. His skin color was a frequent fight that my sister had with my grandmother until my mother told my grandmother that times were different and that we were in America, not the Philippines. My grandmother kept quiet, but was resentful to Jeremy; she ignored him when he talked to her because her skin color was significantly lighter than his. She couldn't understand why her own granddaughter would like someone so dark in

color. The colonization of the Philippines directly affected my grandmother and her psyche about how skin color determines a person's worth. At such a young age, I couldn't understand how my grandmother was so prejudiced. Unlike my grandmother, I could not see anything wrong with Jeremy: he was nice and played with me.

I grew up with a father who although he never said it out loud, believed that women were lesser than him. He felt that males were superior to females. He too, shared the patriarchal beliefs of my aunts and uncles. His condescending tone has made me feel the need to prove myself to older white men. He made me feel that I would never be as good at anything as he was. Whenever I had accomplished something that I was proud of myself for doing, he would tear me down and "one-up" me by saying, "Well maybe if you had tried, you would have been done as well as your old man." Men, such as my father, act as though it is a foreign concept for women to be powerful and assert their presence; they are threatened by strong women. The subliminal messages my father had instilled in me at a young age of being lesser than have caused me to seek the approval of men to validate my professionalism and intelligence. Because I am not white nor am I male, it is shocking to white men, in particular, that I am so bold or confident in myself. Men are taught in our system of male patriarchy that I am weak because I am a mixed woman. Nico Blanco references an experience he has witnessed regarding his mother: "...my mother always does what my [father] tells her to do; as a result, she does not have a free will of her own" (2). Men are taught that because I am a mixed woman, my only purpose in life is to be a trophy wife who is reliant on a man to take care of me because of this I am not entitled to my own opinions – my husband will have one for me.

Whenever I first meet an older white male, I feel compelled to shake their hand because I want them to understand that I too, am powerful. Men treat me as a woman playing in a "man's

world” whenever I would shake their hand. Often they are surprised by how firm my handshake is and compliment me because of how sturdy it is. It used to validate me that they felt my handshake was strong because it meant that these men were acknowledging my presence. I felt like I was being noticed as an equal; however, I came to realize that it is an insult that men are surprised by the firmness of my handshake. Men should see me as an equal counterpart and should expect a firm handshake in professional settings. They should expect me to be able to assert my ideas and to give my input on theirs. The look of surprise they have on their face after shaking my hand disgusts me; it shows that they were raised to believe that I, as a person, was lesser than them because I am female. This “compliment” is a generalization of how women are perceived as weaker than men.

My body is shaped by the gender roles society has created for mixed women. Growing up, I learned to feel validated in my professionalism and intelligence by having a firm handshake. As a mixed woman, I do not feel entitled to power as white men do because for one, I am not a man and two, I am not white. I do not remember at what age I began to value the importance of a strong handshake; however, I do know that I have always associated a strong handshake with power. Through my observations, I have noticed that men with overbearing handshakes are trying to prove something to themselves and release their male aggression by showcasing their dominance. According to Michael Kimmel, “violence is often the single most evident marker of manhood” (104). Some men feel the need to be violent, specifically when they shake hands, because they equate masculinity as violence. Men do not want to be perceived as a woman because gender roles insinuate that women are weaker and subordinate, not strong and dominant.

My cultural upbringing tells me that as a woman I am supposed to be frail and shy and that my opinions are only allowed to exist in my head. My familial and cultural background have drastically affected who I am today. My culture tells me that I can't be confident because then I am being disrespectful. My opinions are not validated and whatever the male head of the family says, goes. Being a mixed woman in American society is already difficult enough; but, it is even worse with the pressures of conforming to the ideal Filipina-American housewife. I am still trying to figure out what makes my opinions less valid than a man's because I am a mixed woman. I will never accept that patriarchal values tell me that I am lesser than a man because that is what our history has said for the past thousands of years. The lack of progress made for women goes to show that patriarchy is still so prevalent in our everyday lives. Although history has told me that I am unimportant, I refuse to acknowledge and conform to the "role" that misogynists and my culture have placed me in. I am important. I am strong. I am capable of doing all of the things a man is able to.

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