



Diasporic Sensibility and Hybridity in Daphne Palasi Andreades's *Brown Girls*

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Abstract

This article explores the articulation of diasporic sensibility in Daphne Palasi Andreades's *Brown Girls*, published in 2022, a novel that centres on the collective voice of immigrant daughters, represented as *brown girls*, navigating identity, belonging, and marginalization in contemporary America. By engaging with Avtar Brah's notion of diaspora space alongside Homi K. Bhabha's ideas of hybridity and the third space, this paper contends that *Brown Girls* transcends a mere depiction of cultural dislocation and yearning, instead articulating a layered and shared diasporic sensibility that challenges fixed and monolithic constructions of identity. The novel's plural narrative, infused with lyrical and experimental prose, destabilizes singular notions of race, nation, and womanhood, thereby foregrounding the tensions and contradictions inherent in diasporic identity. Through close textual analysis, supported by the works of Paul Gilroy, Stuart Hall, bell hooks, and Chandra Talpade Mohanty, this paper illustrates how the girls' experience is shaped by historical marginalization and emboldened by a rebellious desire to redefine their cultural futures. By engaging with key diaspora theorists and emphasizing the interplay of memory, location, and cultural translation, this study situates *Brown Girls* as a critical literary intervention in contemporary postcolonial and diasporic discourse.

Keywords: Diasporic Sensibility, Hybridity, Intersectionality, Third Space Theory, Postcolonial Identity

Introduction

In an era of increasing global displacement and migration, literature that articulates the lived experiences of diasporic subjects holds significant cultural and theoretical value. Daphne Palasi Andreades, a contemporary American author and graduate of Columbia University's MFA program, is known for her nuanced portrayal of immigrant life and identity. Her debut novel, *Brown Girls*, published in 2022, which was critically acclaimed and shortlisted for several literary prizes, explores diasporic sensibility through the lens of collective, racialized girlhood in Queens, New York. Written in a polyphonic first-person plural voice, the novel captures the multiplicities of diasporic existence such as its longings, contradictions, and hybrid identities. The narrative reflects what Avtar Brah terms in *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities* "diaspora space," a location where "the entanglement of genealogies of dispersion with those of 'staying put'" occurs. It is within this space that the brown girls of Andreades's novel construct a shared consciousness at once shaped by dislocation and rootedness, tradition and transformation.

Diasporic sensibility, as theorized by Brah in her

Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities, is not merely a condition of geographic dislocation but a complex interplay of memory, identity, and belonging. As Brah states that, "Diaspora space is the point at which boundaries of inclusion and exclusion, of belonging and otherness, are contested" (Brah 208). The immigrant daughters represented by Andreades as the *brown girls* embody this tension as they negotiate expectations imposed by immigrant families and navigate the cultural norms of their American surroundings. Their identities are continually forged in what Homi K. Bhabha in his book *The Location of Culture* famously describes as the "third space" which is a space that "enables other positions to emerge" by disrupting binary notions of self and other. Bhabha's notion of hybridity is central to understanding the girls' formation of self, as it articulates "the in-between space that carries the burden of the meaning of culture" (Bhabha 56).

This article argues that *Brown Girls* enacts diasporic sensibility not only through its thematic focus on migration, memory, and racialization, but also through its formal innovation and voice. The narrative style is a choral, poetic rendering of immigrant girlhood that constitutes a hybrid

aesthetic space that resists singular identity. The girls in the novel assert: “We are brown. We are many. We are immigrants and children of immigrants” (Andreades 3). Their declaration situates them squarely in the discursive terrain of diaspora theory, resisting essentialist identity categories while affirming collective difference.

Through an analytical framework grounded in Brah’s *diaspora space* and Bhabha’s *third space*, this article explores how *Brown Girls* engages with themes of racialized belonging, hybrid cultural identity, and postcolonial memory. In doing so, it positions the novel within the broader field of diasporic literature and cultural theory, illuminating the complexities of living in-between homes, languages, and histories.

Furthermore, Avtar Brah, in her influential work *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities*, defines diaspora space not merely as the physical dislocation from a homeland but as a conceptual and political space where multiple histories, cultural identities, and power relations intersect (208). For Brah, diaspora is not simply about dispersion; it involves the relational positioning of identities within sociohistorical contexts shaped by colonialism, migration, and systemic inequities. This theoretical framing is vividly enacted in Daphne Palasi Andreades’s *Brown Girls*, where the narrative unfolds within the multicultural neighbourhoods of Queens, New York which is a quintessential diaspora space in Brah’s terms. Narrated in the first-person plural, the novel presents a collective voice that captures the shared experiences of brown girls as they grapple with the layered realities of immigrant ancestry, racial identity, and gendered life in the American context. Their identities are shaped not only by ancestral legacies and familial expectations but also by encounters with systemic marginalization, cultural hybridity, and transnational belonging. As such, *Brown Girls* becomes a narrative cartography of diaspora space, where the girls’ everyday lives exemplify the entanglements of “staying put” and “dispersion,” negotiating between inherited traditions and the demands of their contemporary urban environment.

In Homi K. Bhabha’s *The Location of Culture*, further expands the discourse by theorizing cultural hybridity and the third space, a liminal site where fixed binaries are destabilized and new identities are negotiated through processes of cultural translation. Bhabha notes that “hybridity is the sign of the productivity of colonial power, its shifting forces and fixities” (112), indicating that the interstitial space it creates serves as a locus of both disruption and resistance to dominant epistemologies. Andreades’s *Brown Girls* dramatizes this hybridity through linguistic code-switching, generational tensions, and racialized girlhoods negotiating American modernity. In stating, “We speak English. We speak a hundred different Englishes... in mother tongues lost and found” (16), the narrator highlights the fragmented yet dynamic linguistic landscape through which hybrid identities are continuously negotiated and redefined. The novel’s refrain, “We live in the in-between” (5) is the manifests of Bhabha’s third space as both a site of fragmentation and cultural innovation.

Stuart Hall’s *Cultural Identity and Diaspora* echoes this conception in his assertion that identity is “not an essence but a positioning” (Hall 226). Hall’s model reframes identity as historically contingent and culturally constructed, a

shifting articulation rather than a fixed origin. Likewise, in *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, Paul Gilroy’s concept of the Black Atlantic posits diasporic identity as a product of transnational and intercultural flows, disrupting singular national narratives and emphasizing a dynamic process of identity formation rooted in the memory of movement, rupture, and survival (Gilroy 15). These ideas deeply inform *Brown Girls*, which eschews linear identity narratives in favour of plural subjectivities shaped by migration, race, and cultural entanglement. “We are not from here, not from there,” the narrator reflects, signalling the fluid positionality that Hall and Gilroy theorize.

From a gendered lens, bell hooks in *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* conceptualizes marginality not as a site of deprivation but as a location of resistance and epistemic possibility. Similarly, Chandra Talpade Mohanty, in *Feminism Without Borders*, insists on the necessity of analysing diasporic subjectivity through intersecting categories of race, gender, class, and global power. For both scholars, transnational feminist solidarity and coalition-building across difference are central to understanding diasporic womanhood. These feminist interventions offer critical tools for reading *Brown Girls* as a text of intersectional consciousness, where brown girlhood is shaped not only by cultural displacement but also by racialized and gendered marginality. The narrator remarks, “Our bodies are policed, desired, ignored, feared,” a poignant acknowledgment of how identity is structured through intersecting systems of oppression and visibility (42).

Collectively, these theoretical frameworks form the scaffolding upon which *Brown Girls* constructs its narrative of diasporic sensibility. Brah’s diaspora space, Bhabha’s hybridity, Hall’s cultural positioning, Gilroy’s transnationalism, and the intersectional insights of hooks and Mohanty converge to illuminate the novel’s exploration of displacement, identity, and resistance. Andreades’s narrative not only reflects the entangled realities of diasporic life but also articulates a defiant, polyphonic voice that claims space as both literal and symbolic, within and beyond the margins.

Moreover, one of the most striking features of *Brown Girls* is its use of a collective first-person plural voice. This choice destabilizes the individualistic narrative model, replacing it with a choral, polyphonic voice that resists singular identity. The novel opens in the overlooked corners of Queens, New York, where the sky feels perilously close, with airplanes soaring so low the girls fear being flattened beneath them. This opening line not only situates the narrative within a specific working-class immigrant geography but also captures the claustrophobic intensity of diasporic life.

This collective voice aligns with Brah’s concept of diaspora space as relational and intersectional. The “we” is not homogeneous; rather, it is fractured by differences of race, class, religion, and aspiration. Yet, this voice embodies a shared diasporic sensibility rooted in marginalization and desire. As Hall might argue, identity here is formed in the articulation of difference, not its erasure.

Additionally, the plural voice functions as a critique of dominant modes of representation. It refuses to isolate a single representative “brown girl”, thus resisting the

tokenism often found in mainstream narratives. In *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, Paul Gilroy emphasizes that diasporic identity emerges through both “roots and routes,” reflecting the interplay between historical grounding and the migratory paths that inform cultural and individual consciousness.

Throughout the novel *Brown Girls*, the girls experience a constant tension between their cultural origins and American assimilation, navigating the push-and-pull between their immigrant parents’ traditions and mainstream societal values. One early passage captures this dynamic, “We speak a mix of tongues, English tangled with our mothers’ accents, our fathers’ silences” (Andreades 24). This blending of languages becomes emblematic of their diasporic condition, as they negotiate multiple cultural registers in everyday life.

In a later vignette that expands on this theme, the narrator observes:

“In the Motherland (Fatherland?), our speech is filled with holes. We don’t remember the words for many objects. Some of us flush with embarrassment when we must speak, humiliated by our ineptitude, our jumbled, strangely pronounced words. ... All of us have cousins, aunts, uncles, and grandparents who toggle with ease between various dialects and languages, English included. They apologize for their accents, but we don’t care — we are in awe of them...” (126–27)

Within this framework, linguistic fragmentation and selective amnesia operate as metaphors for ambivalent belonging, where hybridity in language becomes a site of both symbolic erasure and counter-hegemonic affirmation of diasporic identity.

Another expanded quote from the novel’s Part One, chapter named *Musical Chair* illustrates how names and voices are constantly misrecognized or erased:

“We laugh at our teachers, though our eyes tighten. Our classmates roar with glee at their errors and purposely call us the wrong names for the rest of the week... They call us Khadija, Akanksha, Maribeth... Cindy, Esther...” (Andreades)

This misnaming underscores the girls’ linguistic alienation within the American school system, reinforcing how their embodied languages and names are sites of cultural friction. Together, these passages articulate a diasporic poetics where linguistic hybridity is both lived experience and metaphorical framework. Through code-switching, accent, mute silences, and suppressed names, Andreades captures how the girls negotiate belonging and alienation, translation and loss, all of which mirror the hybrid, in-between identities shaped by migration.

Brah emphasizes that diaspora is marked by the intersection of displacement and memory. The girls carry with them the residue of ancestral trauma, even if they are generations removed from it. This is especially evident in the novel’s reflections on food, rituals, and bodily appearance: “We hate the smell of curry on our clothes but miss it when it’s gone” (Andreades 47). These ambivalences embody what Bhabha in his *The Location of Culture* calls the “unhomely”, the estrangement within familiarity.

Memory in *Brown Girls* is fragmented, atmospheric, and often inherited, aligning with Marianne Hirsch’s concept of postmemory in *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative,*

and Postmemory, which describes how second-generation individuals internalize the traumatic pasts of their ancestors through imaginative and affective means rather than direct experience. The girls in the novel recall their origins through partial and emotional fragments: “We don’t remember the words for many objects... Some of us flush with embarrassment when we must speak” (Andreades 126). This linguistic uncertainty symbolizes their tenuous connection to a past they did not live but deeply feel. Their imagined return is not geographical but symbolic, shaped by collective memory, silence, and longing. Thus, *Brown Girls* becomes a narrative of postmemory, where the diasporic subject navigates identity through the spectral presence of inherited histories.

Furthermore, language in *Brown Girls* is a site of negotiation. The girls in the novel move fluidly between registers for instance slang, poetic language, immigrant dialects, constructing meaning through fragmentation. One passage notes:

“We make up our own language, a mix of swears, Spanglish, Tagalog, Arabic, Patois, and Queens girl swagger” (62).

This hybrid language is Bhabha’s third space in action, a linguistic zone where cultural boundaries blur and new meanings emerge. The hybrid language used by the workers of the novel often confounds American listeners, as their accents render comprehension difficult. This is illustrated in the novel through a passage that depicts this communicative disconnect:

“Here are the call centers where, even though Americans get angry because they claim they can’t understand the worker’s accents, the workers say they’re still grateful to make nine dollars an hour...” (133)

The performative aspect of this hybridity is essential. As Bhabha suggests in his *The Location of Culture* that identity emerges through the process of cultural translation, between different cultural contexts and aspects of the self, rather than existing as a fixed entity. Likewise, the girls’ of Andreades voices, while marginalized by mainstream society, are nonetheless generative. They create a cultural vocabulary that affirms their presence.

This space is also one of resistance. As bell hooks suggests, the margins have the potential to serve as spaces of transformative resistance and new possibilities. The linguistic bricolage in *Brown Girls* resists assimilation by asserting the legitimacy of the girls’ hybrid voices. It represents a politics grounded in expression and positioning rather than imitation.

On the other hand, gender in *Brown Girls* is inseparable from race and class. The novel frequently critiques the intersecting oppressions that diasporic girls face. As the writer states, while our mothers urge us to embody quietness, modesty, and virtue, the American world around us encourages us to embrace confidence, desire, and autonomy. This conflict reflects Mohanty’s argument in *Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity*, that third-world women are often subjected to contradictory cultural expectations, and their agency is obscured by both Western feminism and traditional patriarchy.

Henceforth, the brown girls in *Brown Girls* navigate and contest the cultural norms imposed upon them in divergent

ways; some internalize these expectations, others resist them overtly, and a few seemingly vanish into assimilation or disillusionment. Their varied responses reflect what Jana Evans Braziel and Anita Mannur, in *Theorizing Diaspora: A Reader*, term “diasporic intimacies” as the emotional, relational, and embodied engagements that arise from the condition of displacement and the pursuit of belonging (6). These intimacies are deeply gendered, shaped by the pressures of familial obligation, cultural expectation, and the exoticization of brown female bodies within dominant societal discourses.

In this context, bell hooks’ conceptualization of marginality as a site of resistance becomes particularly salient. Rather than viewing marginality solely as a place of deprivation, hooks reframes it as a location of possibility, a space from which new forms of identity and agency can emerge. The protagonists of the novel, the girls’ marginal social positioning enables subtle but meaningful acts of defiance: skipping religious obligations, engaging in same-sex desire, or speaking against cultural expectations. “We kiss girls and boys. We talk back. We dream loud,” (73).

The narrator states, signalling how small, everyday transgressions become expressions of autonomy within the restrictive boundaries of diasporic femininity. Though often met with discipline or erasure, these moments illuminate the capacity for resistance, redefinition, and self-assertion amid layered structures of race, gender, and migration.

To summarize, Daphne Palasi Andreades’s *Brown Girls* is not simply a coming-of-age novel but a lyrical meditation on the fragmented, collective consciousness of diasporic girlhood. Through its choral voice, hybrid language, and poetic form, the novel enacts diasporic sensibility rather than merely describing it. Grounded in Avtar Brah’s theory of *diaspora space* and Homi Bhabha’s *third space* and *hybridity*, this article has illustrated how Andreades crafts a narrative of in-betweenness, one that resists essentialist identity formations and instead maps the overlapping contours of memory, marginality, and gendered dislocation. Scholars such as Paul Gilroy and Stuart Hall have long emphasized the diasporic subject as one forged through cultural rupture and fluid identity. In particular, Hall’s assertion that identity is “not an essence but a positioning” is echoed in Andreades’s refusal to offer fixed narrative identities. The insights of bell hooks and Chandra Talpade Mohanty underscore the importance of examining diasporic narratives through an intersectional feminist framework, a lens that *Brown Girls* adopts by highlighting the layered challenges experienced by immigrant women of colour as they negotiate gender expectations both within their cultural milieu and in the broader society.

Thus, *Brown Girls* serves as a potent example of what Jana Evans Braziel and Anita Mannur term “diasporic intimacies”, intimate moments of cultural production, longing, and affective negotiation that emerge from diasporic living. Andreades’s novel, deeply rooted in contemporary multicultural urban America, offers a textured, dynamic, and poetic exploration of diasporic life that is both particular in experience and transnational in resonance.

Ultimately, *Brown Girls* reimagines diaspora not merely as a narrative of displacement but as an active process of

cultural negotiation, survival, and redefinition. The novel derives its force from moments of tension between origin and assimilation, memory and aspiration, revealing how identity is forged in fluid, often contradictory spaces. Through its portrayal of young women navigating fractured inheritances and shifting affiliations, the text affirms that belonging can be plural, provisional, and powerfully self-fashioned.

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