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The Animalistic Brown Penis and the Meek White Penis

In "*The English Patient*" and "*Fun Home*"

In white cultures, judgments and assumptions are immediately cast upon brown people. Brown-ness, particularly the brown-skinned man, has been made synonymous with danger. The dangerous dark skinned man has been a concept in white dominant cultures for centuries. It has ingrained itself from Disney movies to nightly news and permeated through the entire social stratosphere. They're a threat to anyone and everyone in their vicinity; they can burst at any moment; their inherent danger is part of their genetic code. The white man is not treated in this way; he's a safe wholesome being capable of being a good husband, father, and friend. He can be trusted around women and children; the brown man cannot be. This is the main fear of brown skinned men; while white penises are harmless limbs used for procreation, brown penises are deadly weapons that can be wielded and plunged at any time or place on defenseless women and children. Michael Ondaatje's "*The English Patient*" and Alison Bechdel's "*Fun Home*" illustrate this fear of the brown penis. "*Fun Home*" treats the pedophilic white Bruce Bechdel as less of a sexual threat than "*The English Patient*" treats the respectful brown skinned Kip.

Both Bruce and Kip are noted as being brown or brown-ish when first introduced as sexually threatening. Bruce Bechdel is white but "*Fun Home*" author Alison Bechdel makes an effort early in the story to point out that Bruce uses a bronzing stick. A panel of Bruce

using his bronzing stick has the caption “My father began to seem morally suspect to me long before I knew that he actually had a dark secret” (Bechdel 16). To mention a “dark secret” while showing him darkening his skin heavily suggests that one has to do with the other. On the next page it is revealed that Bruce’s secret is that he “has sex with teenage boys” (Bechdel 17). It isn’t coincidental that his brown-ish skin is mentioned in the same breath as his secret habit of sleeping with teenage boys. It’s a strong implication that his darker skin was the sign that something is amok, because a white man wouldn’t do these things. A white man wouldn’t pray on impressionable youth, but a brown man would. In Michael Ondaatje’s *The English Patient*, Kip is the only brown person when he’s training to be a sapper in England, is the only brown person in the villa in Italy, and is immediately assumed to be threatening (Ondaatje 187). Kip and his white partner Hardy approach the house with their guns during a storm while Hana plays the piano, but Ondaatje only notes that “one of the men was a Sikh” (Ondaatje 63). He doesn’t note what ethnicity Hardy is but he makes sure to point out that one of them is Sikh, and most likely brown skinned. Kip leaves his gun on the edge of the piano. A gun can often be a phallic symbol, so this image symbolizes him exposing himself to Hana. He’s approaching the defenseless white Hana at night with his dark manhood out in the open. Ondaatje pointing out the brown Kip but not the white Hardy emphasizes the idea that only the darker skinned man is a genuine sexual threat. The juxtaposition of the attention brought towards brown or brown-ish skin simultaneously with attention being brought to their sexual threat punctuates the connotation of darker skin belonging to the real sexual threats.

The white sexual predator Bruce is not portrayed as being inherently dangerous, but the brown Kip is. When Alison’s mother tells her of Bruce’s sexual deviance, she adds

“He was molested by a farm hand when he was young.” (Bechdel 58). Bechdel including this in the panel is an attempt to contextualize his behavior. It attempts to make him not perilous; that his history of rape is partially the fault of extenuating circumstances. It argues that had he not been molested, he wouldn’t be a molester as an adult. With Kip, it is subtly implied that those around him think he would rape if the opportunity presented itself. After he and Hana fall asleep together after diffusing a massive bomb, she wakes up and asks him, “I wasn’t taken advantage of was I? Adding, ‘Just joking,’” (Ondaatje 106). Obviously Hana says this in jest, but Ondaatje having her say this puts the idea into the readers mind that this is a real possibility. That he would have seized on the moment of weakness to take advantage of her. The reader knows that Kip only approached Hana initially because he thought there may be a bomb in the piano, yet Kip is still implied to be a legitimate threat (Ondaatje 75). When Hana lies on his she describes his arm as a “dark brown river” that she may “wake submerged within” (Ondaatje 125). The word submerged suggests drowning, that her being so close to him very likely could yield in serious harm to her. Kip is portrayed as instinctually threatening. When Hana rests on his chest she describes his heart like a clock on a mine (Ondaatje 130). Being close to Kip is scary because he could go off at any moment; destroying anyone near him. Kip’s sexual danger is built into his genetic code, but the white Bruce is only sexually menacing because of harm he suffered at the hands of others.

The reason Bruce gets this more sympathetic eye is that he, unlike Kip, is white and thus internally pure and safe. Bruce may be obsessed with tanning, but it’s just a brown-ish shade on his white body (Bechdel 124). It’s temporary. It isn’t genetic. Though Bechdel draws Bruce shirtless very often, these drawings are all in black and white, so Bruce

appears to have the same skin color as everyone else in the story (Bechdel 1; 9; 10; 32). His tanned skin isn't apparent. The reader almost forgets that he would look slightly different from the other characters. His being seen as lighter skinned adds to the sympathy the text gives him. His pathology is not one that makes him more likely to rape. It continues the notion that only dark skinned men, not light skinned ones, are sexual abusers. It's why the book can end with Bruce carrying Alison on his shoulders as they play in the swimming pool (Bechdel 230). It's why Alison says she "shouldn't pretend to know what my father's (erotic truth) was" (Bechdel 230). She says this despite her knowing of his sexual history; that he gave teenage boys alcohol and that he brought them along on family vacations and slept with them (Bechdel 65; 95; 100; 161). Whether it is legally rape or not, it seems clear that he was a danger, yet Alison doesn't label him as such. However, Kip is genetically brown, so the idea that is inclined to rape is based on his pathology. He can't change that. He mentions that his partner Hardy is the only thing still keeping him human, so after he passes away, it's as if he's a dead man walking (Ondaatje 216; 113). No matter how close Kip gets to the others, he will always just be a brown man, and that's the best-case scenario. He's often spoken of as if not even human. He even describes himself as "an animal reacting just to protect myself" after defusing a bomb and nearly dying (Ondaatje 216). When Hana sleeps with him she thinks of how she had to teach him how "to signal out his pleasure with a human sound." (Ondaatje 127). Kip is considered more than just a threat, he is portrayed as an animal, an animal that looks out for itself and doesn't wait for consent. Kip will always be a sexual threat, whereas Bruce gains enough appreciation from Alison to be treated as a somewhat good person, despite his long history of sexual assault.

Bruce is ashamed of himself and is thus treated as healable, whereas Kip, who is proud of his race, is still treated as a threat. Bruce's tan is self-imposed; he's using bronzer and sun tanning to intentionally make his skin darker. His practice of darkening his skin is one of self-shame; he's subconsciously symbolically marking himself as a more threatening person than a white man. Kip is the opposite; he's "unconsciously in love with his body, with his physicalness" (Bechdel 75). He has no shame of his skin. In fact he takes care of his skin by washing his body in the fountain (Ondaatje 72). The brown man who is proud of being brown is met with more resistance; he's continued to be seen as a threat. The white man who has shame in himself gets praise as the book goes on. Bruce is noted as being a major help to Alison with schoolwork, for being the most supportive of her being a lesbian (Bechdel 201; 221). Alison says that they "were close, but not close enough" (Bechdel 225). Alison says "he was there to catch me when I leapt" (Bechdel 232). Bruce's history gets blamed on the pain he suffered as a child, whereas Kip is always assumed to be on the verge of attack. Bruce's shame in himself makes him a sympathetic character despite his sexual abuse; but Kip's confidence and self-pride prevent the others from moving past their initial false judgments of him as a sexual threat.

The white Bruce gets a positive ending to the story but the brown Kip gets a fairly negative one. Bruce is treated almost as a martyr, beginning with him being illustrated in a Christ-like image, while toting a heavy load (Bechdel 7). The story paints him as someone who only became a rapist because of trauma suffered as a child. Bruce is a sufferer, who had to struggle through this life after being scarred and did the best that he could within those circumstances. Kip's story ends with him leaving the villa after the bombing of Japan. Hana is unhappy with how he leaves and Caravaggio says he'll "have to learn how to miss

you (Kip)” (Ondaatje 289). That despite everything they had been through, despite Kip literally removing bombs that would have killed Caravaggio and Hana and thus saving their lives, Caravaggio is not fully capable of missing him. Because of his skin, Kip was perceived as a danger from the moment Hana laid eyes on him. While Bruce gains sympathy for shaming himself by darkening his skin, Kip never tries to lighten his. In the face of his opposition he did not stray from himself, he did not hate those that looked like him, in a way that would have gained him acceptance from the opposition. He did not try to be the “good brown guy”; he remained just “a brown guy”. Had he abandoned his ways to become as European in appearance and behavior as possible, perhaps the fixation on his skin would have evaporated and he would have been recognized as a safe person. But he didn’t, and for that reason he remained an animal, while Bruce was humanized. Bruce got to be defined as a complex human with flaws, and Kip was forced to run away like a stray cat.

Works Cited

Bechdel, Alison. *Fun Home*. First Mariner Books, New York. 2007.

Ondaatje, Michael. *The English Patient*. Vintage Books, New York. 1992.