

AMERICAN WOMAN-CHILD: TROUBLING A NEW TROPE



In May, Lauren Duca wrote a piece for the *Huffington Post* hailing “The Rise of the Woman-Child.” A recent spate of film and television has featured women in their 20s and early 30s who buck the idea, as Anna Kendrick put it, that “if you’re a female, then you should have your shit together and you should be figuring it out.” From Annie Walker in *Bridesmaids* to Hannah Horvath on *Girls*, women are finally getting a chance to be flawed antiheroes who behave badly, abuse substances, and offer a counterpoint to the Seth Rogens of the world (Deborah Schoeneman, a writer for *Girls*, may have originally birthed the term “woman-child” in more ways than one—she wrote a 2012 e-book on it). But the hallmarks of a woman-child—messy relationships, career crossroads, financial failure, all-around bad habits—are privileges granted exclusively to white women.

Hollywood’s recent (white) woman-child narrative usually follows a woman on a journey who ends up gaining nothing emotionally or financially—the message being that it’s okay to fall short sometimes. Maybe, like *Obvious Child*’s Donna Stern, you can find happiness in love, while everything else remains stagnant. Or like Frances Ha, eke out a living but find inner peace. **This liberating laziness, however, is not granted to women of color.** In Western society, people of color must often work several times as hard for the same amount of success and recognition as a white person, often at the price of cultural assimilation. (And then watch while white mediocrity is hailed as an edgy new archetype.)

Author Rebecca Wanzo has dubbed shows like *Girls*, *2 Broke Girls*, and *Broad City* “precarious chick TV” and has noted the joke of such shows “seems to turn more than a bit on how incongruent it is for white girls to live demeaning lives.” If a woman of color was presented as a woman-child, all-too-familiar racist rhetoric would start to play out. A young woman of color who slacks off at work and smokes pot (à la *Broad City*) would be dismissed as lazy and ungrateful.

Mindy Lahiri from *The Mindy Project* is the closest visible woman of color who aligns to Duca’s definition: Mindy Kaling, who portrays Lahiri, has noted that “she’s one of the worst-behaved female leads in the history of television.” Behavior notwithstanding, Lahiri is an OB-GYN in Manhattan—she’s not exactly strapped for cash, so her woman-child sensibilities come to play in dating and interpersonal relationships.

Also, Kaling’s acceptance in the woman-child trope comes at a price of playing into whiteness—Lahiri’s love interests and costars are pretty pale, and her Indian identity rarely comes up. Lahiri reifies the model-minority complex (South and East Asians must be doctors, lawyers, engineers, spelling-bee champions, etc.) in that she must be extremely successful in one aspect of her life in order to even be considered worthy of white acceptance.

The double standards and stereotyping at play when it comes to women of color in Hollywood speaks volumes to the importance of the Carefree Black and Brown Girl movements online, where women of color can connect and display their true, multifaceted selves through blogging, Tumblr, and Instagram. On these online platforms “carefree” isn’t meant literally—instead, it’s an ethos and a mentality to live life on your own terms as a woman of color, embrace yourself, and reject expectations to assimilate.

Taking charge of your own visibility on the Internet is cheaper than making major motion pictures and allows for far more accessibility, which is why many creators of color are finding their voices and stories through web series. Issa Rae, who got her start on YouTube with the *The Misadventures of Awkward Black Girl*, is

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helping an upcoming HBO show, *Insecure*, that could offer up a perfectly imperfect Black female lead. The rise of the woman-child gestures to Hollywood’s slow learning curve toward representing the experience of millennial women, but until big studios acknowledge the diversity and nuances of women of color as well, we are only getting part of the picture. —**Sarah Sahim**