

Myrsina Tonys-Poulos

Towards a multi-layered construct of identity by the Greek diaspora: an examination of the films of Nia Vardalos, including *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* and *My Life in Ruins*

Abstract

The analysis of the two Vardalos films involves a multi-disciplinary approach through the social sciences. The analysis examines constructs of multiple-layered constructs of identity. The themes relating to conformity versus non-conformity will be examined through such constructs within popular culture, as 'beauty', the 'internalizing' of inferior status by children through research in the social sciences. The ascribing of status and power to a minority culture by the majority culture using a Gramscian analysis will enable a window into seeing contemporary Greek diasporic culture as told through the migration experience.

Introduction

Given the rapid pace of globalization, the processes that contribute and help formulate individual/group multiple-layered identities can face torrents of upheaval and turbulence. The migration experience as told through the characters in Nia Vardalos's films, *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* (2002) and *My Life in Ruins* (2009) have resonated with audiences across the world. *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* is the highest grossing independently-made film of all time and will be the central focus of this article. However, very little has been written regarding an analysis of the themes of these films, that reflect the on-going struggle of self/group definition of minorities.

This article is an attempt to de-construct some of the salient themes, that are inextricably linked with the migration/settlement experience, as emerging through the lens of multidisciplinary research and analysis from the social sciences.

Background notes

The film *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* (2002) (MBFGW) was solely written by Nia Vardalos, directed by Joel Zwick and grossed over US\$368.7 million worldwide. It cost US\$5 million to make, with a US\$1 million publicity budget and became one of the top romantic films of the 21st Century according to *Entertainment Weekly* (2003) (see also Holden 2002, Kinzer 2002, Susman 2002). In MBFGW the plot revolves around the advent of a multicultural marriage.

My Life in Ruins (2009) (MLIR), was written by Mike Reiss and (uncredited) Nia Vardalos, directed by Donald Petrie, and grossed \$20,031,211 (Box Office Mojo 2009). Described as a box-office fizzer, it had a budget of US\$17 million (Killer Movies 2007).

This latter film is an example of the new genre of 'film tourism', that uses as a vehicle an emotional attachment/nostalgic view of place, given the international phenomenon of tourism and travel (Hudson & Ritchie 2006). In MLIR an American university professor Georgia Ianakopoulos (played by Vardalos) decides to make a new life, going back to her ancestral roots, through her newly-adopted homeland, modern Greece. She works as a tourist guide for Pangloss Toursas as she tries to find her, as Georgia puts it 'mojo' (κέρφι) meaning 'passion, joy, spirit'. We see her mentored in this film by the aging Irv Gideon, a widower played by Richard Dreyfuss, and Georgia's love interest is the driver of the tour bus, Prokopi Kakas, also known as 'Poupi', played by the Greek actor Alexis Georgoulis. The pun regarding his surname and nickname is intended, much to the amusement of the tour group.

At the film launch in Sydney, Australia, 6 July 2010, Nia Vardalos in a packed-to-the-rafters Hayden Orpheum Cinema, described this film as an encouragement to people to 'hang in there, when 99 things go wrong, this film is about the 1 per cent of the time when things go right' (as heard by me at the event).

Antonia Eugenia (the modern Greek affectionate form is Nia) Vardalos was born in 1962, raised in Canada, and is a child of the Greek diaspora and

a product of Canada's multiculturalism policies. She based MBFGW on her real-life experiences marrying, in 1993 Ian Gomez, who was a former regular on the Drew Carey show, and originally from Chicago's famous Second City Comedy Troupe. He is of Russian/Puerto Rican/Jewish background, and played the cameo role of Mike in MBFGW, and the sleazy, stamp-licking, Greek Hotel owner in MLIR.

In MBFGW the plot revolves around the wedding between Fotoula (Φωτούλα) Portokalos (played by Nia Vardalos), affectionately known as 'Toula' (Τούλα), (from the Greek meaning 'enlightened one') to Ian Miller (played by John Corbett) a teacher at Lincoln Park College. The plot accompanied by all the machinations of the Portokalos Greek extended family in the lead-up to the wedding. I disagree with Tzanelli's representation of the Greek family in this film.¹ I believe the Portokalos family are an example of the 'nouveau-riche' self-made, migrant background, middle-classes in the U.S. This is in disagreement with Tzanelli's (2004) interpretation of them as working class.

Both films portray an Odyssean quest in search of identity as evidenced through the struggle of the Greek diaspora, one without and the other within the country of origin.

The highest grossing, independently-made film 'of all time'!

MBFGW is based on the one-woman show, written/performed by Vardalos. Her largely autobiographical one-woman show in 1997 was originally financed through the Hollywood husband and wife team, actors Rita Wilson (also of Greek background) and Oscar-winning actor Tom Hanks. Nia referred to Rita Wilson as her 'fairy God-sister' (*The Hampson Interview* 2000), because it was Rita who first saw the one-woman show and then approached Vardalos to make it into a film (Whitfield 2002).

It needs to be noted here that the Playtone Company that Hanks owns with his wife and producer Gary Goetzman (of *Silence of the Lambs*, *Philadelphia* movie fame) purchased Vardalos's screenplay adaptation of the one-woman show. Vardalos's fine crafting of her one-woman play was a great test for gauging live audience appeal. This was the first independent film project for Playtone.

Vardalos passionately was wanting to reflect the authenticity of this diasporic culture. In fact the Pentagon, in its attempt to produce write/films

has recognized Vardalos's intimate experiential knowledge of this subject matter that validates the authenticity of the portrayal as a means for teaching authenticity in script-writing (Halbfinger 2005).

Up until this point, Vardalos had been approached to make her one-woman show into a film about Hispanic-Americans. For her, this was unacceptable. Such was the clarity of her vision for the play being made into a film, that in an interview she explained that if her screen-play were to be sold to the major studios 'she'd be out as a screen-writer and lead actress in a heart-beat'. 'They would not have backed a project with an unknown, and it's such a great part for a female that they would have grabbed Julia Roberts and put her in a brown wig and called her Greek and I would have wept' (*The Hampson Interview* 2000). It is no small wonder, Vardalos kept her integrity and portrayed the Greek minority culture within Chicago that authenticated the intricacies of entanglement between an ethnic minority within an Anglophone dominant culture. That is, from the minority's point of view, looking back at the majority culture.

In its first week of release in April 2002 in the U.S. it attracted a small audience and earned \$822,068. The impact of word-of-mouth advertising on the success of this film should be recognized. The film had a 52 week run by April 2003 and had earned \$241,438,208 in U.S. cinemas and a further US\$115,099,973 in overseas takings. Despite being a box office smash, DVD/VHS sales and rentals in the U.S. made \$222,000,000. I agree with Muravyov's (2003) summation that the impact of word-of-mouth advertising must have been a key to its resounding popularity and should not be underestimated. Especially given the meagre, US\$1million advertising budget for this film. MBFGW became the fifth highest grossing film of 2002 and the highest grossing independently-made film of all time. This makes a convincing case that the film's popularity, was fuelled through word-of-mouth. The case is also made for the product placement of the cleaning product Windex, within the film (as the panacea for almost every skin ailment) being now a 'marketer's dream' with sales increasing up to almost 23 per cent since being featured in this film 'with an estimated 144,138,940 viewers worldwide'.

This film had touched a raw nerve it seems, right around the world and not only from the Greek diaspora. It also highlights the effects of migration and transnationalism, as the cultural values that are brought with migrants

seek to adapt and survive in the New World. This is also as much a statement regarding the evolving nature of cultural identity.

Vardalos described in an interview (Whitfield 2002) the cross-cultural family encounter in the following way, and gives a clue as to the reasons for MBFGW's resounding popularity :

Yes, that's been my favourite thing, actually, the amount of people that have come up to me on the street and said, I'm Irish, and you are talking about my family. We had this moment too, where a Chinese family came to our table in Montreal and said, we are from Detroit, my Dad—my Mom is just like your Dad.

Further:

I'm Italian, I'm Jewish, I'm Chinese, and this is my story. How did you know? Did you place a tape-recorder in my house, because my father didn't want me to date the guy who was white, black, Jewish, Chinese, Italian,' I think this became the film for anyone who has a family that drives him or her nuts, but they couldn't live without them.

That definitely includes her family, Vardalos admits (Pearlman 2003). *The following quote from MBFGW regarding Toula's childhood in fact, describes the kind of socialization (processes) with minority children, who knowingly and phenotypically are from a different culture, feel awkward, apparently not fitting-in, appearing different and therefore consider themselves different. In self-esteem language - 'inferior'. Toula narrates a school, lunch-time scene:*

When I was growing up, I knew I was different. I so badly wanted to be like the other girls ... who were blonde and delicate, and I was a swarthy six year old with side-burns. I so badly wanted to be like the popular girls, all sitting together eating their wonder bread sandwiches.

Conformity or non-conformity?

What follows is a brief analysis from psychological research as it impacts social policies. The idea of conforming with the dominant culture, supported with the added layer of what the dominant society considers 'beautiful' or 'pretty' is not a new concept. It was studied through the psychological research of Kenneth B. & Mamie Clark, (Clark & Clark 1950).

This research effectively linked lowered self-esteem and 'internalised racism' in black children in the U.S. with poorer future outcomes. This research was used in a landmark case, that in effect ended the racial segregation of



The black and white dolls, as used in the filmed study, by 16 year old K. Davis. (2005) Replicating the original (1950) Clark research.

schools in the U.S. (what were known as part of the Jim Crow laws) in the win of *Brown vs Board of Education*, 1954.² The doll studies of Clark and Clark (1950) have been successfully replicated for over 50 years (American Psychological Association meeting, New York City, 1987. Also reported in *Time*, September 14, 1987, p.74).

Recently, the Clark research has been replicated and filmed by K. Davis (2005) as part of research through a three minute documentary called *A girl like me*.³

The results being again, that the majority, 15 out of the 21 black children, still prefer the 'white doll' over the 'black doll' replicating the Clark's original research. This demonstrated the black children devaluing 'blackness', in favour of the white doll. Whilst the white children from these replicated studies continued to consider their own colour favourably whilst continuing to see the black dolls in expressly negative terms. The doll studies allow a particular form of identification in psychological research of this kind, that is a form of preference that can cut across race, such as the black doll or the white

doll as preferred by the black/white children when questioned. (Clark 1955; Bagley & Young 1988: 46).

Through such psychological studies children's attitudes to self are thus 'inferred' (Aboud 1980; Williams & Morland 1976). This research comparing results from young children in Jamaica, Ghana, England and Canada suggests that part of the reason ethnicity and language need to be maintained is because these dimensions contribute to the creation of identity in children, especially through multicultural policies. This becomes positive reinforcement for a 'healthy ethnic identity' in the child and helps wider family stability that allows plurality to exist within a socialization of a broader hegemonic culture. It is not surprising then, that multicultural policies challenge established notions of access to information and attempt to address disadvantage *not* of presumed, usurped privilege.

Further, Bagley (1985) sees 'a necessary ethnocentrism' in the development of the child's construct of identity, based on further research (Bagley & Young 1988:58). For without it, underachievement and identity confusion is seen in child development studies. Not only this, he sees it as a requisite for 'adequate general self-esteem and global identity which is a critical factor' if we are to participate in a wider cultural system (Scourby 1994).

The replicated doll studies suggest that many black children had, to a large degree, 'internalized' such negative stereotypical attitudes which the majority community held concerning them. So that the consequences were that the black children had a poorer sense of identity and self-esteem than the white children in these studies.

It is evident that children recognize the pressures of socialization if we are to take the previous research into account and therefore the view of the world as expressed through the 'young Toula' in MBFW is an essential part of the construction of identity in youth minorities.

The end of the film MBFGW is characterized by the main character Toula explaining to her daughter why she needs to go to Greek School(symbolically, the maintenance of Greek language and identity). The child's reward according to Toula then is: 'that you can marry anyone you want'. In a narrative sense this explains the meaning of the film and why the conclusion of the film comes to that end, even with a cross-cultural, mixed marriage, with the prospective

husband attempting to learn the Greek language and being baptized in the rites of the Greek Orthodox Church. In the U.S. those of Greek background marrying non-Greeks are estimated at 70 per cent (Joanides 2003: 191–92). Joanides (2002) from an analysis of the *American Greek Orthodox Archdiocese Yearbook* in part also confirms the ‘inter-Christian marriage’ statistics. That is marriages within the Greek Orthodox Church between Greek Orthodox and non-Orthodox Christian participants. So concerned has the Greek Orthodox Church in America been, that it has produced a resource for Orthodox adherents wanting to marry (Adorno 1991).

‘Beauty is in the eye of the beholder’

The concept of beauty in search of approval is a theme portrayed cinematically through both films. In *MBFGW*, we see the transformation of a frumpy girl, the ugly duckling, who wishes to further educate herself by going to night college and in so doing transform herself – complete with tighter fitting clothes, the bulky cardigans and thick-glasses gone, replaced with contact lenses - into a modern Greek goddess; who then confidently asks if she can sit with the other girls at college (something she was unable to do at the beginning of the film, as, while at school, she was eating ‘moose-ka-ka’, a Canadian pun on the classic Greek dish, moussaka according to the other school children).

Ian Miller (played by actor John Corbett), a teacher at the night college eventually becomes smitten by her and cannot resist. It is poignant that he remembers her before the goddess transformation as a ‘waitress’, then corrected by Toula ‘seating hostess actually’ in the family restaurant ‘Dancing Zorbas’, with Toula just staring at him, literally dumb-founded, transfixed, oblivious to everything around her.

After an awkward silence and equally long stare by Toula she then snaps: ‘... *Just your regular Greek statue.*’ (Toula being rather awkward, trying to make excuses for staring at Ian Miller). Her self-esteem is characterized by Toula, slumping to the floor after the payment at the counter by Ian Miller and his teacher friend, Mike (played by Vardalos’s actual husband, Ian Gomez).

The character Poupi in *MLIR*, also undergoes a physical as well as a psychological transformation. He is described initially as: ‘perhaps they caught a bear and let him drive’, or again as: ‘the creepy, hairy, creepy guy ... he’s right

behind me ... isn't he?', 'What is it with this hair? Is it a full moon?' Yet as his interest increases in Georgia, he slowly attempts to change his looks, the most dramatic being when the beard is totally effaced with a smart haircut at the end of the film for the celebration at the conclusion of the tour.

Here all the popular allusions to Greek masculinity/virility through a hirsute attribute, such as male body hair, comes into play. Poupi eventually brings his hair under control and wins the girl from the American Greek diaspora.

The concept of beauty in both films is as much transformative in terms of the creation of a positive self-esteem, in as much as it is seen to be a desired commodity. It is as much an attestation of identity herself, desirous of being 'beautiful' and in turn seeking such approval.

In the *Frankfurt School of Critical Theory*, T. Adorno (1991) considered the concept of beauty as part of the manufactured 'culture-industry', in which he made the argument for beauty itself, becoming part of the ideology of advanced capitalist society along with the false consciousness that contributes to social domination. This ultimately becomes a manufactured culture-ascribing identity from without – on a macro societal level, according to what is considered 'beautiful' and what is not. Adorno has conclusively made the important connection between the inherent manipulation of consumerist capitalist, dominating culture alongside the all important contributor to self-esteem - the desire to be considered 'beautiful' or attractive in contemporary society.

The advent of such unstoppable forces as technological, economic globalization and the ever present desire for the 'beautiful' glossy images in popular culture, already conjures a heady, intoxicating mass-market mix, in order to rally forth conformity and a mass culture purposely constructed, dominated and fuelled by such aspirant values.

It is what N. Chomsky writes in the foreword of the late A. Carey's posthumous work (Carey, Lohrey & Chomsky 1997):

Alex Carey's enquiries unravel the story as it unfolded through the twentieth century in its manifold aspects:

Advertising devoted to creation of artificial wants; the huge public relations industry with its goal of diversion to meaningless pursuits and the control of 'the public mind'; academic institutions and professions today under renewed assault

from private power determined to narrow still further the spectrum of thinkable thought, the increasing concentrated media.

This is also a visual statement, of the individual to the society, 'this is who I am', or even a more telling identity concept: 'this is who I'd like to be', a veritable case of 'keeping up appearances'. This representative struggle from without, on a societal level often conflicts with the internal, personal, individual's construction of identity. This is especially relevant to aspirant ethnic minorities given an ascribed identity, position, power by the differing majority culture.

A Gramscian analysis

G. Steinem in her number one international bestseller, *Revolution from within: a book of self-esteem* (1993: 256), described the 'politicization of beauty' as being conformed traits, that are globalised, and therefore hegemonic culture can dictate what is beautiful and what isn't. What is sinister here, is that such conforming values, once inculcated internally within the individual, can become self-limiting. This phenomenon can also be interpreted through the prism of 'cultural hegemony'. In A. Gramsci's view, (using his pivotal concept of 'cultural hegemony'), any class that wishes to dominate contemporary culture has to move beyond its own narrow 'economic-corporate' interests, to exert intellectual and moral leadership, and to make alliances and compromises with a variety of forces. Gramsci had already seen this through the combined union of fascism and the Roman Catholic Church in Italy in the 1920s-30s (Duncombe 2002). Gramsci identified this union of social forces as a 'historic bloc'. This point at the crossroads forms the basis of consent to a certain dominant social order, which produces and reproduces the hegemony of the dominant class through a nexus of institutions, hierarchical social relations and conceptions of class. As the establishment of 'cultural hegemony' by the ruling classes, establishes a dominant culture to whom most others want to aspire (Gramsci, Hoare & Nowell-Smith 1971). This analysis is helpful in de-mystifying the impact of 'the American dream' particularly as it seeks to define, categorise and stereotype ethnic minorities. However, more importantly, it outlines position and power as ascribed to ethnic minorities by the very mechanisms used to establish the foundations of majority culture and ensuring its continuation. This Gramscian analysis when

especially applied to minorities, is summarized with great wit and candour as applied to contemporary culture by the late Gore Vidal (2012),

The genius of our ruling class is that it has kept a majority of the people from ever questioning the inequity of a system where most people drudge along, paying heavy taxes for which they get nothing in return.

Vardalos has chosen to begin and end her film, *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* from the point of view of the child within an ethnic minority. Thematically, this explores the ongoing construction of identity from without (that is, the dominant majority culture) and from within (the individual) incorporating 'internalised' values as the child grows and takes her place as a functioning member of contemporary society. Subsequent research coming through the social sciences (using the doll studies research as applied to analysing the effects of social policy) has greatly contributed to the understanding of the formation of negative and positive models of identity, especially pertaining to minorities. Further, aligning theorists, such as Carey, Adorno and Gramsci, it is possible to de-compartmentalize forces inherent within globalization that ultimately contribute to the formation of modern identities. These relentless forces can then be used as vehicles of manipulation promoting conformity by the dominant culture and thereby ensuring their dominance. The Gramscian analysis is central in this analytic endeavour, as it seeks to unmask such malleable constructions used by the dominant culture. This conceptual framework in turn allows for a multi-layered, investigative approach to identity, enabling further clues in understanding its formation, construction and metamorphosis. These dynamic processes as exemplified through the Greek diasporic identity attempting to re-assert their presence within a differing majority culture. It is consistent that such analysis lends itself to a multi-disciplinary approach. The search for 'beauty' as a measure of self-esteem and approval, as it contributes to the formation of identity in minorities, is a salient theme explored in both films by Vardalos. Such themes explored through their complementarity, assembles a foundation on which such problematic constructs, as the ongoing formation of identity, can be explored.

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Notes

- ¹ Tzanelli, R. (2004), 'Europe' within and without narratives of American cultural belonging in and through My Big Fat Greek Wedding (2002)', *Comparative American Studies*, 2, 39-59. See page 45.
- ² *Brown v Board of Education*, (1954), 347 US 483. Please see also <http://caselaw.lp.findlaw.com/scripts/getcase.pl?court=us&vol=347&invol=483>, see footnote 11, regarding K.B. and M. Clark research, accessed 1/09/10. See American Psychological Association meeting, New York City, 1987. Also reported in Time, September 14, 1987, p.74).
- ³ Davis, K. (2005), *A Girl Like Me*, YouTube. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wk_x7s3QiYk>. Accessed 8 Oct 2011.