

## Food, gender, generation and ethnicity: being a 'good' Greek girl?

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### **Abstract**

In this paper I have used the film *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* (MBFGW), to explore the limits and possibilities of identity in a multicultural urban environment at the start of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This funny and highly successful film is used because it tells us something about what it is like to be a 'good Greek girl', negotiating the tensions and possibilities that emerge from the exchange between two cultures. The paper emerges from the early stages of my PhD project and the discussion will explore some of the tensions, possibilities and limits of identity that attach to competing ideas about how one should be a *good Greek girl* in a migrant community in a multicultural city. In doing so the paper will argue that what MBFGW illustrates, with humour, but also with drama and pain, are the roles that gender and generational relations, family and food play in shaping *hybrid, diasporic* identities in multicultural urban environments.

**Keywords:** Ethnicity, Culture, Multiculturalism, Greek Australian, Identity, Food

### **Introduction**

Nice Greek girls are supposed to do three things in life: marry Greek boys, make Greek babies, and feed everyone...until the day we die. (*Toula Portokalos, MBFGW Zwick 2002*)

*My Big Fat Greek Wedding* (MBFGW Zwick 2002) is a romantic comedy which portrays the life and cultural clash experienced between two families when Toula Portokalos (Nia Vardalos), a Greek American woman, marries a non-Greek, Ian Miller (John Corbett). The movie invites the audience to experience Toula's journey as she heads to the alter, to marry Ian and do something more with her life than work as a 'seating hostess' at her family's Greek restaurant (Robertson and Karagiozis 2004). The audience is engaged and entertained by being involved in a wedding driven almost exclusively by particular ethnic concerns. It captures the essence of a close-knit cultural enclave and laughingly looks at the effect of an interloper

(Goldsworthy 2002). The larger than life characters, the very funny and exaggerated ethnic stereotypes, tendencies, and idiosyncrasies, are, according to Vardalos (screenwriter and producer) all 'turned up a notch for comedy sake' (Vardalos 2002). In this paper, which emerges from the early stages of a larger PhD project, I want to suggest that MBFGW is amusing, is successful and popular, because, in part, it explores the limits and possibilities of identity in a multicultural urban environment at the start of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The discussion will explore some of the tensions, possibilities and limits of identity that attach to competing ideas about how one should be a good Greek girl in a migrant community in a multicultural city. I will briefly examine the roles that gender and generational relations, family and food play in shaping hybrid, diasporic identities in these contexts.

### ***My Big Fat Greek Wedding – the movie***

Zwick's (2002) *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* is a representation which seems to give us an insight into the life of a 'good Greek girl'. Toula is 30, Greek and single, which, according to her family, makes her 'way past her expiration date'. She works in her family's restaurant, but seems bored and fed up with her life and we soon learn that she 'wants to do something more with her life' than living up to her father's vision of her as a baby machine. All her father wants for her is to get married to a nice Greek boy and make babies because she 'looks so old'. However, Toula desires a career and a life outside of her overly determined Greek identity (Roth 2005). Once her mother Maria (Lainie Kazan) convinces her dad Gus (Michael Constantine) to let her take some computer classes at college, Toula takes over her aunt's travel agency. Toula then meets Ian Miller (John Corbett), a vegetarian Caucasian-American literature professor, and they date secretly before her family finds out. Her father is beside

himself over her dating a non-Greek. He cannot accept that his daughter is going to marry Ian. Yet as the title promises, there is a wedding, but before it takes place the audience witnesses the first introduction of Toula to the Millers, when the Millers first meet the Portokalos family, and finally a wedding that brings together these two very different families. In the end, everyone accepts everyone else and Toula has reconciled her love for her family and their traditions with her wish to lead her own life.

The movie was produced with a minimal budget and virtually no television advertising or billboards yet somehow the film attracted a very large audience (*People Magazine* April 2004). The movie grossed \$241 million and became the most successful independent film ever (it was subsequently dethroned by *The Passion of the Christ*) (*People Magazine* April 2004). One of the reasons for the movie's popularity is the fact that, 'the easily accessible comedy transcended its Greek label' and managed to 'appeal to a wide cross section of people, true to anyone who's had to deal with ethnic differences, eccentric relatives and even simply the often arduous task of getting married' (*People Magazine* April 2008).

Vardalos had originally written a stand up one woman show. Rita Wilson (Tom Hanks' wife and fellow Greek American) saw an advertisement in the Los Angeles Times for the play and went to see it. She saw it and loved it so much that she waited for Vardalos after the show and said, 'This should be a movie!' Vardalos had already written a screen play. Rita sent Tom Hanks to the next show on the very next night whom also loved it and approached Vardalos about working together to create the movie.

### **Food and a Greek identity**

In my PhD project, a principal interest is with exploring how the analysis of food related behaviours can structure research into the relationship between food, identity, ethnicity, generation and gender. The focus will be on exploring the relationships between gender, generation and food in the lives of Greek Australian women in Melbourne.

As a romantic comedy, *MBFGW* traded on many stereotypical practices and relations deemed to be associated with Greek American families. What I'm concerned with is the way that it demonstrated how significant food is in the Greek culture and how it is used to signify the 'other'. According to Roth (2005: 172) in *MBFGW* "food functions as the main vehicle for the expression of difference (and otherness)" (Roth 2005: 172). For example, food and the act of consuming food are used to show the seemingly unbridgeable gulf between the two families.

During a scene in which Toula and Ian are on a date and seem to be enjoying getting to know each, Ian asks Toula what she does for Christmas with her family. Toula seems to have been caught off guard, her uneasiness with the question is made obvious via the way her expression changes and she starts to nervously play with her hair. 'Uh, my mom makes roast lamb,' Toula says staring into the distance, as if knowing that while this is the truth, she has left out a lot of detail. Ian seems to be completely unaware of how uncomfortable Toula is feeling. She seems to be uneasy with where this conversation is heading. 'Mmm...with mint jelly?', 'No' Toula responds rather abruptly. She appears to be very keen to stop going any further as she does not like where it is heading. After a very long pause, Ian invites Toula to continue, 'And...?' However, she is so keen to stop she also replies 'and...'. Again

there is a very long pause before she gives in to Ian who has now stopped walking and is staring at her, urging her to go on. What follows is a very long description which she gives without taking a breath. 'Well, I'm Greek, right?...Uh, my mom makes roast lamb; my dad and uncles fight over who gets to eat the lamb brain; my aunt Voula forks out the eyeballs and chases me around with it, trying to get me to eat it because it will make me smart. [...] My whole family is big and loud. And everyone is in each other's lives and business. [...] Like you never have a minute alone to just think, because we're always together, just eating, eating, eating! The only other people we know are Greeks, 'cause Greeks marry Greeks to breed more Greeks, to be loud breeding Greek eaters!'

It is only when she has finished that Toula takes a long breath and looks at Ian waiting for his reaction. To Toula's surprise, Ian does not seem to have been put off at all. He seems to be enthused by what he has heard and even more attracted to her. He simply says 'Wow!' and surprises Toula, who has just 'exposed' herself to him. It is as if she is waiting for him to be scared off by the fact that their families are so different. Yet based on what we have seen in previous scenes, we have an understanding that Ian appreciates cultural difference. The first time we are introduced to Ian in the movie, he has walked into Toula's parent's restaurant and sits down with his friend Mike. Trying a piece of food from Mike's plate, Ian says, 'I like the spice on these potatoes. What is it?' 'Like I care,' replies his bored friend. Mike then proceeds to show Ian a polaroid photo of a woman. 'You set me up with her already, I already met her,' Ian disregards the photo, confusing this woman with others: 'They all look the same; they're all the same, Mike.' It is at this moment that Toula approaches their table and seems to have caught Ian's eye. From the first time we meet Ian, unlike Toula, who

wants distance from her over-determined status as ethnic other, we get a sense that Ian desires contact with that very other (Roth 2005).

However, Ian's enthusiasm and desire does not extend to his parents. When the Millers are invited to the Portokalos home for the first time, the Millers are reserved and introverted. When Ian pulls up in front of Toula's house, to what is supposed to be a quiet dinner with Toula's parents, the Millers peer out of the window on what seems to be a gathering of the entire extended Portokalos family. The family are drinking, dancing and laughing and Mr Portokalos is attending to a lamb roasting on a spit. This 'normal' and celebratory behaviour for the Portokalos family is not 'normal' behaviour for the Millers. Later that night after the party, we hear Mr and Mrs Portokalos discuss their first encounter with the Millers and learn that the 'other' is aware of how his family is being othered (Roth 2005). 'They look at us like we're from the zoo. This no work. This no work, Maria. They different people. So dry. That family is like a piece of toast. No honey, no jam, just dry. My daughter gonna marry Ian Miller. A xeno, a xeno with a toast family.'

### **MBFGW: gender, generation and the diasporic experience**

In my research I am interested in the processes, rather than the essences, that are involved in 21<sup>st</sup> century experiences of (multi)cultural identity. Questions regarding collective identity today are not wholly new, however, 'they do seem to take on a special character' where 'here' and 'there' become blurred in this 'culture-play' of diaspora (Gupta and Ferguson 1992:10). Australia is one of the most ethnically diverse nations in the world, in which, as Tsolidis (1996) argues, Australians are living out the blurring of cultural and identity boundaries which make the notion of postmodernism so relevant. Diverse processes - which are largely beyond the limits of

particular national and ethnic boundaries - such as massive movements of people and capital, modern modes of communication and the cross-cultural nature of popular culture, are creating new bicultural identifications (Tsolidis 1996).

Ethnicity in Australia has been understood to refer to the immigrants of the post-war period of immigration. However, the character and experience of ethnicity also extend beyond the first generation migrants into second and third generations. In this sense, how do we categorise the children of the children of the 'migrants' who have lived experience of being 'Australian', 'Greek', Other? My research interests relate to how, in a world of diaspora, transnational culture flows, and mass movements of populations, these 'ethnic' identities are shaped.

During an interview with ABC's Libby Gorr (Vardalos 2002), Nia talked about the being brought up in America or Australia and having the whole world to choose from, but also feeling constrained within your own family. She discussed how her parents immigrated, like many other people of many different cultural backgrounds, in the 1950's, and kept themselves insulated and used each other to get by. In her own experience, she explained, this meant that they became so isolated in 1950's values that Greece progressed but her family and many others had been 'frozen'. These tensions and boundaries are evident in the film and we see Toula maintain, negotiate and challenge these boundaries as she fashions a 'bicultural identity'.

MBFGW's success in appealing to a large audience has been attributed to the fact that the movie represents the 'ethnic family life' characteristic of many families (Taylor 2002). Vardalos thought that she had written 'a Greek story,' but people of various ethnic backgrounds have related to the easily accessible comedy. Vardalos has had many experiences in which people have said, 'I am you'. For example, a woman came

up to her two weeks after the movie opened in America and said, 'I'm Chinese and you're talking about my family' (Failla 2003).

The movie is based on Vardalos' real life experiences of growing up in a Greek American family and her own nuptials to her non-Greek husband. She said it was easy to write because it is based on her own real life situation and what she went through to have her husband accepted by her family and have him comfortable in her culture (Vardalos ABC). Drawing upon her relatives, the traditions of her powerfully ingrained heritage and the hysteria surrounding her own nuptials (People Magazine 2004), Vardalos tapped into the kinds of issues experienced in many ethnic families in multicultural contexts.

While scenes from *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* are larger than life and exaggerated, the film is useful in illustrating how Toula is caught between her Greek and American identity. It reminds us that continuities and changes have occurred in Greek family life in America/Australia. The children and grandchildren of migrants argue that they are Greek or that they are Australian and many consider themselves hybrids, marrying aspects of both cultures (Bottomley 1992). They experience a lifelong, fluid dialogue or exchange that produces particular attitudes to diverse aspects of cultural and social formations. According to Louis Mandylor (who plays Nick Portokalos in the film and is a Greek-Australian of migrant parents), 'the movie has bits of truth that all Greek-Australian kids grow up with' (Graber 2002). Another fellow Greek-Australian, Ross Karavis describes how his Greek heritage gave him an additional sense of identity: 'Being Greek was not the end-all of my existence...I was a chameleon who adapted easily to both worlds' (Karavis as cited in Graber 2002).

The Greek diasporic community, regardless of place of residency, has traditionally been judged in reproducing a sense of Greekness between the nation state, church and

family (Tsolidis 2001). The family has produced and been the most significant place where this sense of Greekness is transferred between generations and is most often linked to the high rate of language maintenance, low rates of intermarriage, extended family households and links with the church and ongoing relationships with the country of origin (Tsolidis 1995). In the diaspora, cultural reproduction creates ‘something different rather than replicates the old or mimics the new’ (Tsolidis 2001; Hall 1996).

### **Conclusion**

The often-referred-to, food-based expression of culture clash in MBFGW is used to not only represent identification and notion of self, but also the unfamiliar and distasteful. In this successful and popular film, food becomes a significant mechanism for representing the ‘other’. By establishing an understanding of ‘us’ and ‘them’ we are able look into the life of a third generation Greek American girl Toula, who, as the next generation, actively shapes multiculturalism and ethnicity in attempts to match her desires. Of course, as the comedy of MBFGW suggests, these attempts are always about limits, tensions and possibilities.

I have used MBFGW to start preparing some of the ground work for a PhD project consisting of a reflexive ethnography situated in Melbourne. As a third generation Greek American, Toula’s experiences in the movie, and the way in which she produces and responds to them, offer powerful, often humorous, often painful understandings of cultural identifications. The analysis here provides a valuable space to locate my study of food, gender, generation and identity for Greek women in a multi-cultural, urban environment.

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