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## Book Review

### Good Girl

by Aria Aber, United Kingdom, Bloomsbury Publishing, 2025, pp. 368, Price 699 (paperback), ISBN: 978-1-52-667904-8

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**Good Girl**, by Aria Aber, United Kingdom, Bloomsbury Publishing, 2025, pp. 368, Price 699 (paperback), ISBN: 978-1-52-667904-8

Aria Aber's debut novel *Good Girl* (2025) provides feminist readers with a deeply uncomfortable and essential examination of the experience of coming of age as a coloured woman in a society that either obscures or exaggerates femininity. Aber's *Künstlerroman*, set in post-9/11 Berlin, chronicles the experiences of Nila Haddadi, a 19-year-old daughter of Afghan refugees, as she confronts the intertwined violences of patriarchal dominance, creative aspiration, and cultural estrangement. Instead of depicting a narrative of redemption, Aber presents what Saidiya Hartman (2008) refers to as "the aesthetics of the unfinished"—a storytelling approach that emphasizes ambivalence, longing, and resistance.

Aber, a recipient of the Whiting Award for poetry, infuses her prose with remarkable clarity. The outcome is a narrative that is both emotionally profound and politically significant rooted in the particularities of diasporic sorrow and broad in its feminist analysis. This review analyzes *Good Girl* using intersectional feminist theory, focusing on how gender, race, and exile influence both Nila's experiences and the narrative structure.

### Embodied Rejection: Feminist Resistance and Diasporic Authority

From the beginning, *Good Girl* establishes its protagonist as a subject of conflicting social narratives. Nila, the offspring of a revolutionary mother who perished in exile and a father immobilized by patriarchal sorrow, is nurtured amidst the remnants of displacement—her Berlin apartment complex marred by swastikas and quiet. Her defiance manifests not as theatrics, but as a means of survival. "I was ravaged by the hunger to ruin my life," she confesses—an articulation of what Sara Ahmed (2010) calls the *feminist killjoy*, a subject whose refusal to conform exposes the violence of compulsory happiness.

Aber refrains from framing Nila as a moral cautionary narrative. She portrays her as a young woman whose aspiration to transcend gendered and societal norms propels her into acts of bodily defiance—sexual autonomy, substance use, nightlife—that are both emancipating and hazardous. Aber's poetics elucidate the structural conflicts confronting

diasporic women: the expectation to embody both cultural integrity and white intelligibility, modesty and assimilation, survival and silence.

### **The Bunker: Politics of Pleasure and Queer Temporality**

The majority of Nila's story takes place in Berlin's underground club scene, more precisely in "the Bunker," a made-up location that serves as a stand-in for Berghain. For Nila, this is a momentary escape from her manufactured identity, not merely a place to party. She finds a sense of corporeal liberation in the queer and anarchic rhythms of techno. Aber doesn't romanticize the club, though. As *Vogue* notes, "Aber captures the rave scene not as aesthetic, but as aftermath—where the trauma of exile meets the ritual of oblivion."

The feminist readers will recognize the Bunker as a paradox it offers: Nila a platform for agency, but it also embodies internalized oppression, as her autonomy becomes intertwined with self-harm, as Bell Hooks (2000) describes. Paul Gilroy's (2005) theory of postcolonial melancholia—the persistence of historical trauma in contemporary affect—is echoed in these moments. Aber's Berlin is permeated with this melancholy, and Nila's immersion in its periphery is not a ritual of healing, but rather a form of embodied resistance.

### **Intimacy and Invasion: Marlowe and the Colonial Gaze**

Nila's relationship with Marlowe Woods, a 36-year-old American novelist, is one of the novel's most incisive feminist interventions. He fosters her artistic growth while simultaneously idolizing her "dark and aquiline face," reducing her to a muse and exotic subject for his own creative rebirth. Aber skillfully reveals the gendered and racialized dynamics of these relationships, which are anchored in power and disguised as mentorship.

This is not merely a narrative of manipulation; it is also a case of "epistemic violence," as Gayatri Spivak (1988) defines it: the ingestion and distortion of subaltern voices. Marlowe's fascination with Nila's Afghan heritage is consistently antagonistic. It is ultimately appropriated, abstracted, and aestheticized. In this dynamic, women of colour are invited to perform their trauma for white liberal audiences, but they are rarely permitted to author the narrative. Feminist readers will recognize the excruciating familiarity of this dynamic.

The moment in which Nila fabricates her Greek heritage in order to circumvent exoticization is a moment of feminist disidentification—a strategic refusal to be recognized in accordance with the standards of colonial desire. This moment also recalls Chandra Mohanty's (2003) critique of the way in which "Third World women" are portrayed in Western feminist discourse as static figures of oppression or resistance, rather than dynamic agents.

### **Maternal Haunting and Feminist Inheritance**

The novel is infused with the memory of Nila's mother, a feminist revolutionary in Afghanistan, who serves as both a burden and a model. Nila's grief, rebellion, and creativity are influenced by her absence, which is not silence but structure: a haunting. By utilizing Avery Gordon's (2008) theory of haunting as social memory, we can interpret the mother as a feminist ghost: an unfulfilled promise of liberation that persists in the present context.

Photography becomes Nila's mode of reconnection and reclamation. "I wanted to document my life... to possess undeniable evidence," she explains. This is institutional labour, as feminist readers will recognize it—an insistence on documenting an existence that defies the logic of invisibility. The act of taking photographs transcends mere aesthetic practice; it is a radical feminist intervention in a world that erases or flattens the experiences of diasporic women. It is crucial that Aber refrains from concluding the mother-daughter narrative. Rather than elegantly honouring maternal sacrifice, *Good Girl* mourns it, complicates it, and permits it to remain unresolved, thereby confirming Hartman's aesthetics of the unfinished.

### **Vulnerability, Voice, and the Limits of Rebellion**

Aber's prose is sharp and evocative, particularly in rendering Nila's vulnerability as a form of political expression. Her metaphors ache with alienation—"I was born within its ghetto-heart, as a diminutive, wide-eyed rat"—inviting feminist readers to consider the affective cost of transgression. Nila is neither savior nor symbol; she is a subject in flux, one whose contradictions and failures are central to the novel's critique of simplified narratives

of liberation.

Nevertheless, *Good Girl* is not without its constraints. Nila's obsession with Marlowe occasionally borders on the absurd, which undermines the novel's otherwise incisive portrayal of power dynamics. There is a risk that the novel may unintentionally mirror the "damaged party girl" archetype it is intended to deconstruct, as her cycles of intoxication and recovery may become narratively repetitive. The feminist critique would have been further refined by a more thorough examination of the ways in which white supremacy influences Nila's self-perception.

However, these are inconsequential shortcomings in a novel that is otherwise replete with enlightenment. Aber's strength is not in his moral clarity, but in his ability to portray the chaos of survival, particularly for individuals whose identities have been influenced by migration, memory, and misogyny.

### **Conclusion: A Reckoning, not a Redemption**

Nevertheless, *Good Girl* is a feminist triumph not because it provides a resolution, but rather because it embraces the contradictions of rebellion. Aber does not depict Nila's voyage as a straightforward arc of empowerment. Rather, she provides a confrontation with the inherited violence of exile, as well as with identity, yearning, and grief. The novel's political strength is its refusal of tidy conclusions, which favours a raw, affective confrontation over the comfort of closure offered to the reader.

*Good Girl* is a work that resonates as both literature and testimony, particularly for feminist readers who are navigating the layered realities of racism, gender, and displacement. Aber reveals the emotional toll of resisting cultural erasure and social containment through Nila's fractured, urgent voice. Her defiance, which is characterized by artistic desire and self-destruction, resists being romanticized or moralized. It is merely adamant about being observed.

Aber's debut is not secure. It does not provide catharsis. However, it fulfils the fundamental requirements of feminist literature: it persists, it complicates, and it disturbs. It necessitates that we question not only how women of colour resist, but also what that resistance looks like when it fails to be redemptive or legible, and what it costs to choose it anyway.

### **Further Readings**

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