

## **An Intersectional and Postcolonial Look at Beauty Standards, Subjectivity and Ideology: *Friends'* Fat Monica as a Case Study**

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I watched *Friends* years ago for the first time in Damascus, Syria, where I grew up, and I remember being fascinated by it because I thought it offered a glimpse into American popular culture, which was a major interest of mine at the time. I thought to myself that all friends get together every day in a New York City apartment. They hang out in cozy cafes and drink coffee out of humongous mugs. There was nothing cooler than this lifestyle! At thirteen years old, I could not tune into my internalization of Eurocentric beauty standards and the thin ideal on the show. I also do not recall how I engaged with the character of Monica, one of the friends who used to be fat as a child and teenager, and the depiction of Fat Monica. More than ten years later, I have a better understanding of the overall context in which I was exposed to American television shows. My individual experience reflects what political culture scholar Lane Crothers refers to in his book *Globalization and American Popular Culture* as the global spread of American popular culture, values, and lifestyle through different types of media. *Friends'* representation of Fat Monica is completely in line with the cultural messaging I received as a child about beauty and fatness.

In this essay I provide an overview of intersectional feminism and postcolonialism as theoretical frameworks of analysis in Cultural

Studies, as I examine Fat Monica's representation and subjectivity on *Friends*. Through a deconstruction of the episodes that feature her on the show, I explore the intersections of body size and gender to critique Eurocentric and phallogocentric notions of beauty employed to Other the character of Fat Monica. Thinking through American popular culture to study globalization, I draw on postcolonial theory to complicate binary perceptions of beauty in postcolonial settings, referring to Syria as an example (Crothers). Lastly, I provide a brief overview of potential responses to dehumanizing representations of fatness and perceptions of beauty, such as bell hooks' concept of the oppositional gaze.

I choose intersectionality as one of my frameworks due to its interdisciplinary commitment to activating structural cultural change and creating counter hegemonic ideologies (Carbado et al.). Rooted in Black feminism and Critical Race Theory, the intersectional approach coined by Crenshaw in 1989 is a dynamic approach that paves the way for nuanced understandings of aspects of identity such as gender, race, and class and the interplay of oppression and power in society. The intersectional lens is relevant to my analysis, as it offers the tools for understanding how Fat BIPOC women are susceptible to Othering, fat-shaming, and body regulation.

As I demonstrate through examples, there are parallels between the Othering of Fat Monica and the Othering of BIPOC folks. In other words, Fat Monica signifies a figure who is Othered, mocked, shamed, and sidelined because of their 'difference.' Strings argues in *Fearing the Black Body* that fat-phobia has deep-seated roots that can be traced back to the early nineteenth century:

I argue that two critical historical developments contributed to a fetish for svelteness and a phobia about fatness: the rise of the transatlantic slave trade and the spread of Protestantism. Racial scientific rhetoric about slavery linked

fatness to “greedy” Africans. And religious discourse suggested that overeating was ungodly. (6)

Strings explains that during this time, different groups were Othered in American society along with African Americans, including “Celtic Irish, Southern Italians, and Russians” (7). Strings’ findings are consistent with Ania Loomba’s, as she writes in her chapter on “Situating Postcolonial Studies,”

in the mid-nineteenth century, the new science of anthropometry pronounced Caucasian women to be closer to Africans than white men were, and supposedly female traits were used to describe “the lower races” (Stepan 1990:43). Accordingly, African women occupied the lowest rung of the racial ladder. (63-4)

This racial Othering pointed out by Strings and Loomba, and its association with gender, sparks my analysis of Fat Monica’s representation on the television show *Friends* as the Other.

Intersectionality is a helpful approach to highlight issues related to representations of female BIPOC identities and subjectivities on television in the context of North America and Europe. However, in order to expand my analysis to include how women in other parts of the world might experience the Othering of Fat Monica and engage with the thin ideal, I draw from postcolonial theory. In *Colonialism/Postcolonialism*, Loomba outlines components of postcolonial studies and provides an overview of its theoretical contributions and major critiques. Loomba defines postcolonialism in her first chapter:

It has been suggested that it is more helpful to think of postcolonialism not just as coming literally after colonialism and signifying its demise, but more flexibly as the contestation of colonial domination and the legacies of

colonialism. Such a position would allow us to include people geographically displaced by colonialism such as African-Americans or people of Asian or Caribbean origin in Britain as “postcolonial” subjects although they live within metropolitan cultures. It also allows us to incorporate the history of anti-colonial resistance with contemporary resistances to imperialism and to dominant Western culture. (12)

Loomba adds that postcolonial studies must be understood within the larger framework of decolonization and Western critical theory, where it has its origins, and elaborates that decolonial activists unsettled hegemonic definitions of race, language, class, and culture (20).

Loomba identifies the Marxist tradition as having a seminal impact on postcolonial scholarship, as she highlights that anti-colonial intellectuals such as Aimé Césaire and Frantz Fanon interweaved the Marxist critique of capitalism and colonialism with race and argued that this interweaving is necessary in any colonial context (22). Racial Othering formed the basis of relations in colonized nations, and Marxist anti-colonial thinkers acknowledged this fact and operated from it. They also emphasized that race and gender intersect with class and that colonialism impacts the culture of colonized people greatly. Based on these notions, they argued that the cultural sphere where race and gender relations are formed is interconnected with the economic base (24).

The broad theoretical scope of postcolonialism, its conceptualizations of the subject, and the historical context in which it emerged as a field of inquiry are relevant to forming a nuanced Cultural Theory analysis of Fat Monica’s portrayal and its impact on postcolonial female spectatorship. I am curious about the way that the thin ideal as part of a colonial view of beauty is reinforced and maintained in cultures of former colonies, such as Syrian culture.

Since the French mandate in Syria ended almost seventy years ago, how are Syrian people still impacted by colonialism? Or to frame this differently, how does the thin ideal as a colonial norm make its way to postcolonial subjects? This exploration requires thinking about Gramsci's notions of hegemony and ideology, which are central concepts to the project of Cultural Studies.

Gramsci was concerned with the ways in which ideology affects or prevents cultural change in conjunction with the conditions created by the economy (Loomba 28). He believed that subjects could work collectively to create counter ideologies that lead to their emancipation. Furthermore, his interest in examining 'common sense' can explain how groups of people buy into a narrative, the thin ideal as an example, that causes them pain and harm (Loomba 29). Gramsci formed the concept of hegemony as he was grappling with the role of ideology in maintaining the status quo (the dominant ideology) among the working class. As Loomba puts it, he defined hegemony as "power achieved through a combination of coercion and consent" (29). Based on this dynamic understanding of power, colonial beauty standards, as a form of regulation, operate on many levels and in different spaces. In other words, capturing exactly how the thin ideal is reinforced around the world is a very complex task. What makes this task challenging is that within the context of globalization, postcolonial women might choose to maintain beauty standards that reproduce their oppression.

If women around the world have been conditioned to a binary view of beauty, is there a way to recover a former, less-colonized notion of beauty? In other words, what role do postcolonial subjects have in forming their ideology? On the relationship between postcolonial subjectivity and colonial power, Loomba cites postcolonial scholar Gayatri Spivak, who cautioned against adopting a romanticized idea of culture prior to colonialism, illustrating the multidimensional nature of history (18). However, Loomba explains that there should be a balance between having an awareness of colonial impacts and

understanding that they do not define postcolonial experiences in their entirety. These ideas demonstrate that it's challenging to recover former beauty standards outside of colonial ideology, but this does not limit postcolonial subjects' ability to challenge oppressive beauty norms. These are some of the ideas that inform my interest in the dynamic between postcolonial female spectatorship and Fat Monica's portrayal on *Friends*.

In order to offer a critical examination of Fat Monica, played by Courteney Cox, I watched five episodes of *Friends* where Fat Monica makes an appearance either through a flashback or an imaginative alternate world scenario. The examined episodes are S.2-E.14, S.4-E.2, S.5-E.8, S.6-E.15, and E.16. Overall, Fat Monica's subjectivity and fatness are intertwined and used as comedy throughout the show. Her lack of centrality as a subject, combined with her shaming into thinness, lead to her Othering and oppression. I am particularly intrigued by Fat Monica's neglected subjectivity in comparison to other subjectivities on the show and its intersection with the Eurocentric view of fat as inferior.

The depiction of Fat Monica's subjectivity only in relation to thin protagonists is one of the central Othering strategies employed. Fat Monica is either Rachel's loyal best friend, Ross' sister, or Chandler's comedy target (before she transforms into her thin self), and his love interest (after she loses the weight). This Othering says that a fat character is not a human being with an independent set of struggles, emotions, hopes, and dreams. The second Othering strategy utilized on the show is Fat Monica's constant association with food. This reinforces the notion that as a fat character, there is nothing to her subjectivity outside of her relationship with food. In other words, the centrality of food in her depictions replaces any potential for her own subjectivity to be highlighted and celebrated. Overall, Fat Monica is depicted as a simplistic linear character rather than a complex human being who is trying to reconcile with herself and people around her.

This persistent neglect of Fat Monica's subjectivity speaks to how she is portrayed as the inferior Other who's unworthy of recognition and empathy. Fat Monica's presented sense of style is another example of her Othering, as she is always in the same generic outfits that do not indicate beauty, charm, or individuality. When Rachel enters scenes, Fat Monica's unattractiveness is contrasted with Rachel's sensuality and sense of style. The use of a fat suit in order to portray Fat Monica, combined with the disregard for her subjectivity, is an additional means of dehumanization. Gullage argues that the use of a fat suit is not inherently insulting and that fat suits can be used to create nuanced narratives about fat people that represent parts of their complex identities. The way it is employed on *Friends* as part of the overall narrative about Fat Monica, however, does not signify such nuanced meaning (187). Below are my observations on the portrayal of Fat Monica, broken down per episode.

### **Season 2, Episode 14 - "The One with The Prom Video"**

This is a flashback episode to Fat Monica's videotaped prom night, shown through the gaze of all the friends as they watch from Monica's living room. The flashback features Fat Monica, Ross, their parents, Rachel, and Monica's and Rachel's prom dates. Fat Monica makes her very first appearance on the show as she poses for the camera in a bright red long-sleeved dress, with a sandwich in her hand. When Monica first walks in, the camera is zoomed in on her stomach, as her dad, who is videotaping, yells in a panic-like tone, "Wait, how do you zoom out? There she is!" Joey reacts with his famous punchline, pointing at the screen: "Some girl ate Monica!" Monica responds to Joey, "Shut up, the camera adds 10 pounds!" Chandler asks in response, "So how many cameras were actually on you?" This scene sets the tone for Fat Monica's representation

throughout the show, as her body size is clearly assigned the role of humour.

Fat Monica is smiling for the camera while the recorded background laughter accompanies the scene. I am conflicted about how to interpret her smile. Is this moment about her subjectivity as she experiences her one and only prom night? Is she confidently unbothered by the gaze or is she cluelessly unaware of her undesirability by it? When Rachel enters the flashback as Monica's thin best friend, Fat Monica's subjectivity starts to revolve around Rachel. For example, Fat Monica gets mayonnaise on Rachel while hugging her. This mayonnaise staining incident sums up Fat Monica's portrayal on *Friends* as a character who is always consuming food and whose presence is either inconvenient or is used to highlight Rachel's glamour. Fat Monica's neglected subjectivity on *Friends* is emphasized through her role as the loyal and completely dedicated best friend to Rachel. This becomes clear when Rachel starts complaining to Monica about her prom date, Chip, potentially not showing up. Monica's sole role is to comfort Rachel or even forget about her own date and miss prom night just to support Rachel.

Joey, Chandler, and Phoebe start showing serious interest in what is happening in the videotape as Ross and his dad explore the possibility of him taking Rachel to prom and revealing his hidden feelings for her. However, to Ross' disappointment, Chip shows up and steals his opportunity to be alone with Rachel. Ross' subjectivity and heartbreak over Rachel is placed at the centre of the story and Fat Monica and her experience are completely set aside. What happens to Ross is so central that it becomes the main concern of everyone watching the video. Monica starts questioning Ross about what happened, and all the friends are attentively listening. Rachel walks up to Ross and kisses him; everyone sits in the moment in awe of its intimacy and beauty. Silence replaces the recorded background laughter as Rachel makes her way to Ross.



### ***Season 4, Episode 2 - "The One with the Cat"***

This is an episode where present-day Monica gets to go out with Chip Matthews, Rachel's popular high-school boyfriend. As Rachel expresses her disapproval to Monica because Chip cheated on her in high-school, Monica explains to Rachel that she owes it to her inner fat girl to do this because she "never lets her eat!" Monica is again de-centered in this episode, as her struggle revolves around her ability to finally date someone who would not acknowledge her when she was in a bigger and 'shameful' body. Again, the phallogocentric gaze is what is centered on rather than Monica's own subjectivity, as her sense of self-worth is entirely based on her desirability by the gaze.

### ***Season 5, Episode 8 - "The One with All the Thanksgivings"***

This episode contains flashbacks of two Thanksgiving dinners that are central to the development of Monica's character in the storyline. In the first flashback, Monica is still living in her bigger body and in the second flashback she has lost all the weight. The major turning point that leads to Fat Monica's transformation is a comment made by Chandler in the first flashback, which she overhears. The flashback begins with Fat Monica's parents setting the table for Thanksgiving dinner while she runs down the stairs, out of breath, drinking a diet Coke. She is in a loose red and purple sweater, her cheeks are red, and she is accompanied again by the recorded background laughter. Once Rachel enters the scene, Fat Monica falls into her usual and primary role of the supportive best friend.

As Monica is grating cheese, Rachel walks into the kitchen and starts talking about how 'done' she is with high-school boys. At this point, Rachel and Ross' romance takes over and the scene becomes about Rachel's struggles in finding true love. The sidelining of Fat Monica turns into humiliation when she turns to Chandler to

ask if he enjoyed the 'Mac N Cheese' she had made especially for him. Chandler rolls his eyes and responds halfheartedly, "Oh yeah, it was great. You should be a chef," then gets up to end the conversation. She has no time to decide where to go from there because Rachel comes to update her on her drama with Chip. Following this scene, Fat Monica walks in on Ross and Chandler talking, and she hears Chandler beg Ross not to leave him at his parents' house so he "would not be stuck with his fat sister."

The second flashback is of a later Thanksgiving, and it revolves around the transformation of Fat Monica into a thin and more attractive version of herself and her desire to get back at Chandler for calling her fat. Monica is in a form-fitting, velvety maroon dress and walks into the room with radiance and confidence to greet Chandler. Chandler is "drooling," as Rachel later puts it. Monica's cheeks are not red, she does not have a sandwich or a snack in her hand, and she is not out of breath. There is no accompanying background laughter either, as silence is used for this victorious moment for Monica. Monica's subjectivity is projected through her desirability and ability to attract the gaze; her sense of achievement is centered on her weight loss. Monica's entire journey as a woman is about her self-contradictory struggle to be seen and chosen by Chandler.

My favourite line in this whole flashback occurs when Monica genuinely expresses to Rachel that she is not satisfied by finally obtaining Chandler's gaze:

Yeah, I look great and yeah, I feel great and yeah, my heart is not in trouble anymore blah blah blah . . . But I still don't feel like I got him back, you know? I want to humiliate him! I want him to be naked and I want to point at him and I want to laugh.

I like this line because Monica here describes the intense feelings of shame caused by Chandler's negation and mockery of her fat body, and Rachel acknowledges her pain and tries to be the supportive friend that she needs. There is some potential for empowerment between two women in this scene otherwise overshadowed by the overall theme of catering to the male gaze. In this episode, Fat Monica's subjectivity is completely ignored until she loses weight, but when she becomes thin, her life revolves around maintaining Chandler's gaze. Monica even becomes a professional chef because of Chandler's halfhearted compliment on her cooking.

### ***Season 6, Episode 15 - "The One That Could Have Been" - Part 1***

This is a two-part speculative scenario episode where the friends imagine how their lives would have turned out had they made different choices. The 'what if' scenario is set off as Monica wonders what life would have looked like had she remained fat.

At the beginning of the scenario, Fat Monica appears to be hanging out at the coffeeshop with Joey and Chandler as they both mock her "boring" boyfriend. Later, Ross walks in with Rachel and she sees Monica for the first time in years. Monica enthusiastically compliments Rachel on her looks, while Rachel returns the compliment with less enthusiasm and immediately asks, with her eyebrows raised, "Did you lose weight?" It is worth noting that Fat Monica is in the same type of outfit that she is usually in, a loose turtleneck and jeans. There is nothing that indicates style or sexiness about her outfit the way Rachel's outfits often do.

Fat Monica's relationship with food is a central theme in this imaginative scenario because she never lost the weight. She is depicted with Kit Kat bars, rice cakes, ice-cream, lattes, mayonnaise, and doughnuts. This association defines her

subjectivity in relation to food and implies an overall lack of dimensionality and 'discipline' in her character, which emphasizes her Othering and dehumanization. This portrayal also serves to centre the phallogentric gaze because of Fat Monica's lack of conformity to the thin ideal. Another major theme in this episode is Fat Monica's depiction as a "30-year-old virgin." This depiction plays into the stereotype that thirty-year-old heterosexual fat women could not possibly be sexually active or find fulfilling romantic relationships. The episode ends with a scene of Fat Monica dancing around in her apartment, living in the moment and enjoying a doughnut while she is moving with the music. I struggle in unpacking this scene because it brings forth contradictions about how Monica is actually feeling versus how she is perceived and produced by the phallogentric gaze.

### ***Season 6, Episode 16 - "The One That Could Have Been" - Part 2***

In this part-two speculative fantasy episode, I am taken by surprise as Monica and Chandler fall in love with each other. Fat Monica is portrayed as a desirable, loveable and attractive character, but she is only perceived this way because she ends up getting chosen by Chandler. The disheartening fact is that this is the alternative scenario as opposed to the real one where Monica completely transforms her physique, catering to Chandler's gaze. In some ways this episode offers fat female spectators false hope that there is a humanizing multidimensional representation of Fat Monica on *Friends* because this representation is only imaginary as the title of the episode suggests.

Due to its popularity and accessibility on streaming websites, *Friends* is a demonstration of how the thin ideal becomes hegemonic and ingrained around the world, including in postcolonial contexts. *Friends* is a channel through which the thin ideal is valorized and

presented as the only ticket to beauty. As I watch these Fat Monica flashbacks and the speculative scenario, I wonder: Do fat female spectators around the world unpack this depiction of Fat Monica as a shameful past that shadows her throughout the entire show?

The desire for thinness unifies women in different social locations, but the idea of challenging this desire can be out of reach within such contexts as Syrian culture. Since Syrian society has been in conflict for the past decade or so, people are more concerned with surviving day-to-day and are less interested in thinking about the impact of restrictive beauty standards. Furthermore, creating cultural change takes collective effort and those who have privilege, which grants them the luxury of critical thinking, are not able to mobilize their entire communities. How can a society grapple with notions of beauty when it has been ruled by an authoritative regime for decades and is just coming out of a revolution and a violent conflict during a global pandemic? Syria, given its postcolonial context, is perhaps a demonstration of Spivak's hesitation to answer yes to her question, "can the 'subaltern' speak?"

The difficulty of forming any kind of collective resistance in a country like Syria does not necessarily mean that fat women there are not critical of portrayals of fatness on television. Resistance can happen in people's homes as they are engaging with the different images they are gazing at. In her chapter on "The Oppositional Gaze," bell hooks examines media representations of black women and presents the notion that the relationship between spectators and media portrayals is an interactive relationship. Taking up in Crenshaw's intersectional feminist lens, bell hooks argues that black women continue to resist their negation on Hollywood screens through their oppositional gaze (125).

bell hooks also provides examples of oppositional spectating that black women shared with her in interviews, such as shutting down their inner critic; "gazing from a distant lens" as opposed to an

intimate lens; and refusing to identify with the ways in which they are (or are not) depicted in mainstream film. Moreover, she draws on the work of Fanon and Stuart Hall to explain power as something that is “intrinsic rather than external,” demonstrating the role that spectators have in forming their ideologies (116). bell hooks’ concept of the oppositional gaze and the notion of intrinsic power are useful concepts when thinking about the unique and personal ways in which fat women might be unsettling representations of fat bodies on television. My personal experience as a young postcolonial spectator is an articulation of the ideas hooks discusses in her chapter. Having the opportunity and ability to critique linear television representations of fatness and beauty more than a decade after watching *Friends* for the first time is proof that I have been tapping into my inner oppositional gaze all along, and I refuse to believe that I am the only one who engages in this form of resistance.

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