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Challenging South Asian Stereotypes in Popular Media:

A Textual Analysis of *Never Have I Ever*

# **Abstract**

This research paper examines the representation of South Asian stereotypes in the Netflix show Never Have I Ever. The paper analyzes the portrayal of South Asian culture and experiences through the lens of Critical Race Theory, feminist theory, and Standpoint Theory. The study focuses on the intersection of race and gender and how this intersection is portrayed through female South Asian characters within the show. The analysis finds that while the show challenges some stereotypes, it also perpetuates the model minority myth and presents a narrow view of South Asian experiences. The study highlights the importance of seeking out and elevating diverse perspectives within the community to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the complex experiences of South Asians in the United States.

# **Introduction**

South Asian representation in television has a long and complex history. In the early days of television, South Asians were often portrayed in stereotypical and one-dimensional roles, such as convenience store clerks or cab drivers. However, in the 1980s and 1990s, there was a push for more accurate and nuanced representations of South Asians on television. This led to the creation of shows like *The Mindy Project*, *Master of None*, and *Fresh Off the Boat*, which featured South Asian lead characters and explored their experiences in a more authentic way. Additionally, South Asian actors like Aziz Ansari and Mindy Kaling have been able to create their own shows and tell their own stories, helping to shift the narrative and break down stereotypes.

Mindy Kaling, a multi-talented actress, writer, and producer, has made a significant impact in Hollywood in recent years. She first gained recognition as a writer and actress on the hit television show *The Office*, where she portrayed the quirky and lovable Kelly Kapoor. She went on to create and star in her own shows, including *The Mindy Project* and *The Sex Lives of College Girls*. Kaling has also written an autobiographical coming of age called *Never Have I Ever,* which has garnered critical acclaim for its portrayal of a first-generation Indian American teenager navigating high school and her family life. However, the show has also faced some critiques for perpetuating stereotypes and presenting a one-dimensional view of Indian culture. Some critics have argued that the show “hinges on banal stereotypes and reaffirms the model minority myth (Venkataramanan).” Despite these critiques, Kaling's work on the show has earned her a Peabody Award, as well as nominations for Emmy Awards and a Writers Guild of America Award, indicating that it has resonated with many viewers.

To explore these critiques and examine the ways in which *Never Have I Ever* reinforces or challenges stereotypes, this paper will conduct a textual analysis of the show using feminist theory and critical race theory. It will focus specifically on the intersection of race and gender and how this intersection is portrayed through female South Asian characters within the show.

# **Literature Review**

## *Race in Media*

Race has played a significant role in television since the medium's inception, and it continues to influence character development to this day. The way that characters of different races are portrayed on television can impact the way viewers perceive and understand different racial groups. In the past, many shows depicted characters of color in stereotypical and one-dimensional roles, perpetuating harmful and inaccurate stereotypes. However, in recent years, there has been a push for more diverse and authentic representation on television. This has led to shows that feature characters of color with complex and nuanced personalities, experiences, and storylines that go beyond their race. By incorporating diverse perspectives and experiences into character development, television has the potential to challenge stereotypes and promote empathy and understanding across racial divides. However, it is important to recognize that race still plays a significant role in character development.

When considering South Asian characters in particular, Rastogi (2010) notes that the release of the movie *Slumdog Millionaire* gave South Asian and Indian actors an opportunity to break into popular media. However, many South Asian characters are still presented in minority alongside white characters and are often presented as the butt of the joke, as seen in characters like Baljeet from *Phineas and Ferb* and Ravi from *Jessie* (Shimizu, 2017). This not only reinforces stereotypes but also contributes to a broader culture of racism and discrimination towards South Asians in America. South Asians have even been casted due to their relative similarities to Arab and Muslim characters in a fearful post 9/11 climate (Alsultany 2012; Nacos and Torres-Reyna 2007). As expressed by Koshy (2002), just as the African American population’s history has been shaped by slavery and the Jim Crow Laws, South Asian American realities have been shaped by immigration and legislative policy.

Another way in which South Asians have been stereotyped is through the model minority myth which portrays Asian Americans as a high-achieving and successful group that has overcome obstacles and achieved success through hard work and education. While many argue that the minority myth is positive, many have identified areas of problematic assumption. This stereotype suggests that Asian Americans are a model for other minority groups to follow and implies that their success is a result of their cultural values and work ethic. However, the model minority myth ignores the systemic barriers and discrimination that many Asian Americans face and obscures the diversity of experiences within the Asian American community. Furthermore, the stereotype can be harmful as it creates unrealistic expectations and can lead to overlooking the challenges and struggles that many Asian Americans face (Thakore 2014).

## *Gender in Media*

The history of female stereotypes in television is long and complex. From the early days of television, women have been shaped by patriarchal norms and expectations. Women were often portrayed in limited and stereotypical roles, such as the doting housewife, the seductive femme fatale, or the ditzy secretary. These characters were often defined solely by their relationships to men, being overly emotional, and need to be perceived highly by others. Over the past decades, on average, women have only made up thirty to forty percent of major characters (Glaslock). Angyal (2014) argues that these impressions can be limiting and harmful, sustaining narrow and unrealistic ideals of femininity that are often tied to whiteness and heteronormativity. Similarly, women have been held to extremely narrow beauty standards (Wu, 2017). While there was push in the 1970s and 1980s, for more empowered female characters on television, resulting in shows like *Charlie's Angels* and *Wonder Woman*, even these shows were often criticized for perpetuating sexualized stereotypes of women.

## *Intersectionality in Television*

Johanna Dorer and Brigitte Hipfl argue that feminist media studies must confront “the lack of diversity within feminism itself” and consider the ways in which “feminism is not just gendered but also raced, classed, and sexualized” (2013, p. 309). In the same way, Levine (2009) emphasizes the importance of intersectionality in media, arguing that multiple aspects of identity, such as race, gender, and sexuality, should be considered when analyzing media texts.In general, intersectionality is critical to understanding the complexity of identity and representation (Brooks and Hebert, 2006).

South Asian women have long been subjected to intersecting systems of oppression in television, including racism, colorism, and sexism. When South Asian women are portrayed on screen, they are often reduced to limited and stereotypical roles, such as the submissive and obedient wife or daughter, the exotic and sexually available other, or the victim of oppressive cultural expectations (Mukherjee 2017). These portrayals not only perpetuate harmful stereotypes but also contribute to the marginalization and erasure of South Asian women's experiences. In addition, casting choices often privilege lighter-skinned actresses or those with caucasian features, reinforcing hegemonic skin tone ideologies and further erasing the diversity of South Asian women's experiences (Thakore, 2014; Hunter 2005). This often occurs when the casting director or creators of shows like *Bridgerton* are white men who measure beauty by their own standards. This just shows how crucial it is to have diversity in the writing room, and that South Asian women are allowed to fully express their agency and complexities without being reduced to harmful stereotypes or subjected to intersecting systems of oppression.

## *Subjectivity in Storytelling*

From a standpoint theory perspective, Mindy Kaling's narrow view of South Asian experiences can be attributed to her social location and specific life experiences. As a successful, wealthy, and highly educated South Asian woman who was born and raised in the United States, Kaling's experiences are vastly different from those of many other South Asians who may be facing issues related to immigration, discrimination, or socioeconomic status.

Standpoint theory suggests that individuals who occupy marginalized positions within society, such as those who experience racism or discrimination, are better able to understand and articulate the experiences of their communities (Harding and Wood 2009). Patricia Hill Collins (2000) says it best in relation to the unique perspectives of Black women in the United States: “we have to see clearly that we are a unique group set undeniably apart because of race and sex with a unique set of challenges.” In contrast, those who occupy more privileged positions may have a limited perspective and may struggle to understand the experiences of those who are less privileged.

Therefore, while Kaling's work has been important in bringing visibility to South Asians in mainstream media, it is important to recognize that her perspective is limited and does not represent the full range of experiences within the community. Similarly, Bradley W. Gorham (1999) argues that representation in media is not a simple dichotomy between positive and negative, and discussions about representation should consider its complexity and the ways in which it can both challenge and reinforce stereotypes. For instance, Adesokan (2019) explains *The Mindy Project* as an example of the paradox of visibility, in which portrayals of marginalized groups can emphasize existing power structures. This is the idea that while greater visibility can lead to greater representation, it can also depreciate certain voices. He argues that while The Mindy Project was groundbreaking in its use of a South Asian American woman as the lead character, it also supported certain stereotypes. This is not to say that Kaling's perspective is not valid or valuable, but rather that it is important to seek out and elevate diverse perspectives within the community to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the complex experiences of South Asians in the United States.

# **Methods**

For this research project, a textual analysis will be conducted on the Netflix show *Never Have I Ever* to identify South Asian and gender stereotypes in the light of Critical Race Theory, feminist theory, and Standpoint Theory. The sample for this study will be the ten episodes of the first season of the show, which follows the life of a teenage girl of South Asian descent navigating her high school experience in the United States. The data for this study will be collected through a close reading and multiple viewings of the show, with detailed notes taken on the characters, plot, dialogue, and visual elements. The data collected will be analyzed thematically, using the theoretical frameworks of Critical Race Theory, feminist theory, and Standpoint Theory to identify themes related to South Asian and gender stereotypes. Critical Race Theory will be used to analyze the portrayal of race and ethnicity in the show, with a focus on identifying instances of racial stereotypes or microaggressions. Feminist theory will be used to examine how gender is portrayed in the show and to identify instances of gender stereotypes or sexism. Standpoint Theory will be used to analyze how the show's portrayal of South Asian culture and experiences reflects the perspectives and experiences of different social groups. The findings of this study will contribute to a better understanding of the representation of South Asian and gender stereotypes in popular media and provide insight into how they can be addressed and challenged.

# **Analysis**

## *Model Minority*

The model minority myth presents itself in several ways within *Never Have I Ever*. The main character, Devi Vishwakumar, is at the top of her class. For example, when Paxton picked Devi to be in his group for a class project, he said “She’s good at this stuff so it’s like a guaranteed A. That’s why I asked her (“… gotten drunk with the popular kids” 5:08) She is also involved in numerous extracurriculars such as Model UN and Chinese club (“… started a nuclear war” 6:55) Similarly, the show portrays Devi's family as successful and affluent, with her mother being a doctor and her father being a scientist. However, while the show highlights the achievements and cultural identity of South Asians, it also perpetuates the myth of the model minority by ignoring the challenges and discrimination faced by many South Asians in America. The show does not really explore issues such as racism or poverty in depth, which are prevalent in the South Asian community. Therefore, while the show presents a positive image of South Asian culture and success, it does so at the expense of ignoring the diversity and complexity of the South Asian experience in America.

## *Cultural Erasure and Religiosity*

Devi often expresses discomfort with her Indian heritage and cultural religiosity. For example, in the Ganesh Puja episode, Devi finds the traditional Hindu ceremony to be annoying and embarrassing. Throughout the episode, Devi expresses her frustration with her mother's insistence on adhering to Indian traditions and customs. She complains about the food, the decorations, and the chanting, and even goes as far as to mock the ceremony in front of her friends, saying “It’s a weird Indian thing (“… felt super Indian” 17:35).” Overall, Devi's discomfort with the ceremony is reflective of her larger discomfort with her Indian identity, as she struggles to reconcile her desire to fit in with her white peers.

Throughout the show, Devi strives to fit in with her white peers and be seen as "normal". This is reflected in her crush on a popular white boy, her attempts to sneak out to a "normal" high school party with popular kids, and her desire to attend a prestigious university. This erasure of cultural identity can be damaging to the South Asian community, by portraying their cultural practices and religiosity as strange and outdated and perpetuating the idea that success can only be achieved by abandoning one's cultural roots.

*Eurocentric Beauty*

Devi’s cousin, Kamala is often presented as more beautiful and desirable than the darker-skinned and more traditionally Indian Devi. In fact, the first time we see Kamala, she is referred to as Devi’s “beautiful cousin” as a man rides his bike into the family’s garbage cans staring at her. The man proceeds to ask if Kamala is a model and her response: “I could never be a model. I’m too curvaceous (“Pilot” 5:32).” This perpetuates the harmful and pervasive stereotype that lighter skin and more Eurocentric features are more attractive and desirable, especially within the beauty industry. This whitewashing of brown women in beauty can lead to internalized racism and colorism, as well as a lack of representation for those who do not fit into these narrow beauty standards. By presenting Kamala as the "ideal" South Asian woman due to her lighter skin and "less Indian" characteristics, the show perpetuates harmful beauty standards that marginalize and erase the experiences of darker-skinned and more traditionally Indian women.

## *Gendered Emotions*

In Never Have I Ever, Devi is often presented as overly emotional and concerned with her popularity, perpetuating a gendered stereotype about teenage girls. Devi's emotional outbursts and dramatic behavior are often depicted as irrational and excessive, with the show's narrative framing her reactions as “straight up psycho (“Pilot” 11:39).” Additionally, Devi's constant preoccupation with her social status and popularity with boys reinforces the stereotype that teenage girls are overly concerned with superficial matters. For example, Devi chooses to lie to her friends about hooking up with Paxton Hall-Yoshida in order to seem cooler (“… had sex with Paxton Hall-Yoshida” 20:50) This portrayal of Devi as emotionally volatile and shallow reinforces the gendered stereotype that girls are dramatic and only focused on appearance and popularity.

These stereotypes are harmful as they reinforce the idea that girls are inferior to boys, and that their emotions and interests are not worthy of serious consideration. By portraying Devi in this way, the show perpetuates the notion that girls are irrational, while boys are critical and level-headed. This gendered stereotype has real-world consequences, as it contributes to the marginalization of girls and women and reinforces the notion that they are not capable of leadership or success in fields traditionally dominated by men.

## *Trailblazing Women*

While discussing its limitations, it is important to recognize the merits of *Never Have I Ever*, particularly considering its focus on women's narratives which distinguishes it from other present South Asian American shows. In contrast to the male-focused productions of Hasan Minhaj, Aziz Ansari, and Kumail Nanjiani, where women are either portrayed as possible South Asian brides or not included at all, *Never Have I Ever* centers on a family of three independent and vibrant female characters, each with her own unique set of qualities and flaws.

The emphasis on women's stories in *Never Have I Ever* is not limited to the teenage protagonists, but also extends to the older female characters, Nalini and Kamala. Nalini's character is a successful dermatologist who takes pride in her work and is respected by her colleagues. Kamala is a Ph.D. student pursuing her passion in the field of biology, despite the societal pressures to participate in an arranged marriage and give up her work after having children (“… had to be on my best behavior” 5:50). Both characters break traditional gender roles in the workplace, where women are often relegated to supporting roles or positions deemed "suitable" for their gender. By portraying these characters as successful and ambitious in male-dominated fields, *Never Have I Ever* challenges the notion that certain professions are reserved for men and reinforces the importance of equal opportunities for women in all career paths.

# **Conclusion / Discussion**

In conclusion, this research paper has conducted a textual analysis of the Netflix show Never Have I Ever to examine how it reinforces or challenges South Asian and gender stereotypes. Through the use of critical race theory, feminist theory, and standpoint theory, several themes have emerged that shed light on the representation of South Asian experiences in popular media.

However, as a reminder, Mindy Kaling draws from her own life as an Indian American woman growing up in the United States to write *Never Have I Ever*. Therefore, her perspective and understanding of the world are shaped by her identity and experiences, and this influences the way she tells stories through her writing. As a result, Kaling is only capable of writing from her own experiences and standpoint, which contributes to the authenticity and relatability of the show. In an interview with The New York Times (2020), Mindy addressed some of the criticisms she has received over her stereotypical roles. Her response:

“I come from comedy, where the funniest characters are the flawed ones, like Michael Scott [Steve Carell’s character on “The Office”], and my training was for writing those characters. The problem is, they’re all white. So when you try to play that character and you’re Indian, and you’re the only Indian character people have, it’s within their right to say: “How dare you do that to us? We have no representation (Kaling).”

Kaling later explained that it all comes down to a lack of representation. In reality, if there were more shows depicting Hindu teenagers, then there would be more perspectives and more experiences for people to relate more to. In the same way, Kaling feels as though there is a need for more LGBTQ+ representation for South Asian people, as there still seems to be a stigma around coming out within the community (Arora, 2020).

Moreover, the show does challenge some gender stereotypes by depicting a female protagonist who is not solely defined by her romantic relationships, but also her academic pursuits and her relationships with her family and friends. Additionally, the show depicts a diverse range of female characters with different personalities, interests, and experiences. However, the show also perpetuates some gender stereotypes by portraying female characters as emotional and irrational at times.

Overall, Never Have I Ever is a complex and nuanced portrayal of South Asian experiences in the United States. While it does reinforce some stereotypes, it also challenges others and provides much-needed representation for a community that has been historically underrepresented in popular media. As the show continues to gain popularity and influence, it is important to continue critically analyzing its representations and to advocate for even more diverse and authentic representations of South Asian experiences.

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