



COR2631: Scratches on their Minds: Images of Asia in

Hollywood

The Commodification of South Indian Stereotypes in

Hollywood using "*Never Have I Ever*"

Throughout the recent generations, many Hollywood tv shows and films have started to tap into the diversity aspect of American culture, particularly surrounding Asian Americans. Platforms like Netflix have started to create shows that center around an Asian American households or culture, such as *Bling Empire*, *The To All the Boys I Loved Before Series* and, the show in which this paper will be talking about, *Never Have I Ever*. Today, cinema has moved into highlighting more on Asian American culture and creating “relatable” characters, of those in which the audience may be able to relate to. Particularly with the show *Never Have I Ever*, it is known as one of the first shows that centers around an Indian American and delves into Indian culture unlike any other Hollywood based Indian shows or films. But with this rise of representation, comes the rise of preconceived stereotypes that are continuously enforced through Hollywood media. So what is the cost of this? While Asian Americans have been represented in American cinema, does this actually benefit them or does this reinforce the many stereotypes that Hollywood has enforced and commodified? By using the show, “*Never Have I Ever*,” this paper will reveal the commodification of prominent cultural stereotypes and tropes within the South Indian Asian identity in Hollywood.

Through American film history, Asian Americans have always been shrouded in various stereotypes that filmmakers continue to commodify. From the strict family/tiger mom dynamic to the nerdy children, many of these stereotypes are seen in Asians who appear on screen. Indian Americans also have their own set of stereotypes such as the tacky accent, the arranged marriage trope, and the destined wish to assimilate with American culture. Another point that is raised when talking about Asian American stereotypes is the Model Minority Myth. The Model Minority Myth, as defined by the associate director of Learning for Justice Sarah Blackburn, is “The characterization of Asian Americans as a polite, law-abiding group who have achieved a higher level of success than the general population... (Blackburn, 2019).” While from an outside view, this does not look like a problem, in actuality, the model minority myth creates an unrealistic expectation for which many Asians feel like they have to live by. Many films and shows commodify the Model Minority Myth as an attempt to show “true representation” of the culture. Through film history, Indian Americans have always been stereotyped the same way plus the fact that they were never the main leads. When observing American shows, Indian Americans have always served as the side characters. For example, in the global hit show *Modern Family*, Alex, who was one of the main teen protagonists, had to compete with an Indian boy named Sanjay for the role of the valedictorian of their class. Sanjay, throughout the time in the show, became the poster child of Indian stereotypes, including the fact that Sanjay’s parents in the show, had the tacky accent that is part of the Indian stereotype. Another example of a show commodifying the Indian American stereotype which gained more attention was the *Simpsons*. One of the characters in the *Simpsons*, named Apu, was an Indian man who fit all the stereotypes of the typical Indian. On top of this, the voice actor playing him was a White man, who later apologized for, “... his contribution to Indian American stereotypes after 30 years of playing the character (Rao, 2021).” All this being said, there have been many occasions where the Asian American identity in Hollywood, more specifically the South Asian American identity, has been tainted with the stereotypes that have been enforced through these films and shows.

This longing for South Asian Identity being represented better in American film and television, then came true when in 2020, Netflix released the show “*Never Have I Ever*.” Helmed by Indian American actress, producer, and writer Mindy Kaling, *Never Have I Ever* tells the story of Devi Vishwakumar, an Indian American, living with her widowed mother, Nandini, and her cousin Kamala. The show delves into Devi’s wish to assimilate with American culture while being held back by her traditional mother and her attitudes towards the modernized American culture. It was considered the first body of work that broke the wall of South Asian stereotypes as it was written as a semi autobiography of Kaling herself, who later in an interview stated, “If this show does well, hopefully, and it just feels more normal to see Indian people on things, then there will hopefully be more shows about the Indian American community greenlit” (Arora, 2020). With its bold statements on how the show will be the

pioneer of having South Asian representation, netizens flocked to view it with expectations that it will just do that. Unfortunately, some were extremely underwhelmed by the show as all it did was enforce the Indian stereotype as stronger as ever.

From the first season that was released in 2020, netizens already started noticing that while the show did a good job in making Indians more human, it still reaffirmed many of the stereotypes that have been prominent including reaffirming the model minority myth, mainly coming from the three main women of the show; Devi, Nandini, and Kamala. Devi, who gets the best grades in the class, always aims to attend an ivy-league university and has a very strong rivalry with Ben Grossman, a White student in her class who she is competing to get the highest grades with. In the pilot episode of the show, it was introduced that "...he (Ben) and Devi had been vying for the number one spot in the class every year since the first grade. You might call them the John McEnroe and Jimmy Connors of Sherman Oaks High School (Kaling, 2020). Nandini, Devi's mother, owns a well-known dermatology clinic while Kamala, Devi's cousin, is getting a PhD in Biology at Caltech University, hence the reason why she is staying with them. All three women play some role in the model minority myth as they are trying to live up to the expectation of success. While this can be argued that the show is able to portray the strength and power of Indian women like no other, it still "...reaffirms the meritocratic stereotype that the community is high-achieving by virtue of hard work and traditional family values (Venkataramanan, 2020)." This type of trope is seen not only within South Asian American representation in Hollywood, but also in Asian American representation in general. This can also be seen in the relationship between Devi and her mother Nandini as the expectations put on Devi stem from getting into a college and not "ruining her life (Kaling, 2020)" as Nandini puts in the 9th episode of the season when she caught Devi with her crush Paxton. An example of this would be in the pilot episode, when Devi was about to drop her textbook in which her mother had taken to the temple to get it blessed. This is an Indian tradition in which one brings their textbooks in order to get it blessed by the goddess of knowledge Saraswati, hence giving good luck to the owner of the textbook and having good luck with grades. After this textbook is blessed, it cannot touch the ground as it would lose the blessing. In the scene, Devi's textbook was about to fall off the prayer altar but Devi managed to catch it before it touched the ground. Nandini saw this and said "Devi, that textbook has been blessed. If it touches the ground, I have to take it back to the priest. I don't have time for this (Kaling, 2020)." Many of these exchanges happen throughout the season as Nandini's expectations of her Devi, leads her to make many right and wrong decisions.

Another form of cultural stereotyping that has been seen in *Never Have I Ever* is the racial deafness between North and South Indian culture and the back and forth between the two throughout the show. When discussing South Asian American stereotypes in general, one of the biggest ones is that Hindi is the only language that is spoken in India and that Bollywood is the main form of entertainment in India. India is a vast country that is filled with various languages, dialects and cultures. The area of India that contains more of the Hindi-speaking population and the Bollywood entertainment hub is North India. North India primarily speaks Hindi, due to the "...Aryan influence in its history (Gu, 2009)." Some of the areas within North India are New Delhi, Kashmir, Punjab, and more. South India on the other hand is very different. South India's primary language is Tamil. Areas within South India consist of Chennai, Tamil Nadu, and Kerala. South India also houses Tamil entertainment or Kollywood which is the Bollywood equivalent. Many Hollywood representations of South Asians always have them speaking Hindi and dancing to Bollywood songs or watching Bollywood movies even though India is more than just North India. *Never Have I Ever* was marked as one of the first shows that centered around a South Indian culture and had Tamil speaking characters instead of Hindi. But even with this revelation, the show still had signs of racial deafness towards differentiating the two cultures. It is true that the majority of the show and the characters like Nandini and Kamala spoke Tamil, but there were parts in certain episodes that still had North Indian culture which sometimes overshadowed the original South Indian representation. Particularly in Episode 4 of season 1, titled "Never Have I Ever...felt super Indian." The premise of that episode is Devi's

questioning of her Indian identity as she, her mother, and cousin take part in the traditional Hindu prayer and festival known as Ganesha Puja, also known as Ganesha Chaturthi. Within the first ten minutes of the episode, the song “Nagada Sang Dhol,” played with Indian dancers dancing to it in the temple that Devi was in. While the show was supposed to be the representation of South Indian culture, the song “Nagada Sang Dhol,” is a well known Hindi song from the Bollywood movie Ram Leela which starred Deepika Padukone. Another example of the interchange between North and South Indian cultures is using a fork and spoon to eat rice which is also seen in episode 4 of the show. The usual eating culture of South India is to use one’s right hand to eat instead of a fork and spoon whereas it is relatively more common to see a fork and spoon being used in a North Indian eating setting. These North Indian references, which also contribute to the prominent stereotypes seen in South Asia representation, might be added into *Never Have I Ever* as a form of familiarity for the Western audience as South India is a “new” and “unfamiliar” concept that has not been seen in Hollywood media thus far. Overall it was a show which, “focused on North Indian culture which has no relation to Devi or her family (Ashok, 2020).”

One cultural trope that was prominent in *Never Have I Ever* that was commodified was Kamala’s (Devi’s cousin) trope regarding her arranged marriage. The trope of arranged marriage has been seen in various South Asian images in Hollywood. One prominent example being the Disney movie, *Aladdin*. Princess Jasmine at the beginning of the film was being forced into an arranged marriage by her father the Sultan. Many Bollywood movies also contain the trope of arranged marriages which then is carried on to Hollywood as a stereotype. Another example of this trope being prominent in Hollywood would be in the show, “*The Office*,” under Mindy Kaling’s (who is also the writer and producer of *Never Have I Ever*) character, Kelly Kapoor. In the show, Kelly Kapoor was forced into an arranged marriage under parents’ wishes even with the fact that she loved someone else. This trope has been seen in countless movies and shows, and it has also become a very prominent stereotype in South Asian imagery in Hollywood. Since the pilot episode of *Never Have I Ever*, Kamala was forced into an arranged marriage by her parents because, “that’s what Indian women do (Kaling, 2020).” Throughout the entirety of the season, Kamala’s main trope was navigating her life and wanting to abide by her family’s wishes but also wanting to follow her own lead. The second to last episode of the season, delves into Kamala meeting her arranged groom’s family and her feeling “torn between the life she wants for herself and the life her parents have imagined for her (Jaimini, 2020).” While this trope could have the potential to represent taking control of one’s life and Kamala realizing that an arranged marriage is not the life she imagined, the outcome that was seen in the show was extremely different. In the last episode of the show, Kamala breaks up with her long term boyfriend Steve (East Asian) for her arranged groom Prashant (South Asian) because of his looks. This not only enforces the stereotype of arranged marriages, but it also implies that South Asians are superficial and shallow as only looks matter which only makes the representation of them much more stereotypical.

While *Never Have I Ever* can be seen as a show as the first of its kind to have South Indian representation, it still encompasses many prominent cultural stereotypes and tropes that have been seen constantly in South Asian images in Hollywood. Many of the responses from South Asians regarding *Never Have I Ever*, had a unanimous feeling of confusion. Many felt that the show was created for an audience that is, ““white-washed,” or in other words, for a “white” audience (Ashok, 2020). But what *Never Have I Ever* does accomplish is paving the way for normalizing South Asian identity in Hollywood and making it normal to see South Asians on screen. I myself as a young Indian, would like to see more of my culture and race being portrayed in Hollywood productions without the use of stereotypes that demoralize us and make us not look normal, because at the end of the day, we are people just like everyone else in the world and we don’t need stereotypes to define who we are.

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