

Religious Stereotypes in TV Shows

Ayesha Akram ^{*,1}

^{*}Department of Humanities, Illinois Institute of Technology, Chicago, IL 60616, USA

We live in a world full of different cultures and religions, so much that even specific countries have various sub-cultures and traditions within certain groups. However, we also have a history of these cultures and groups clashing with one another throughout the past few hundreds and thousands of years. And this idea isn't specific to only one country, but to humans in general. In today's time, we often see these ideas portrayed across various media sources where certain people of color or religious groups are portrayed in a negative light, whether it be knowingly or unknowingly. In this specific paper, we'll be focusing on TV shows and how South Asians are negatively stereotyped in them.

South Asian people are often portrayed as clingy, cheesy, and a somewhat annoying group of people when it comes to TV. So many notable shows, including *The Simpsons*, and Disney Channel Shows such as *Phineas and Ferb* and *Jessie* have had South Asian representation that has often achieved the opposite of what it should. Instead, these characters have only reinforced these negative portrayals and become sort of the forefront of them. They themselves have become another offensive term that is used to describe a group of millions of people. A good amount of childhood shows have characters that are epitomes of South Asian stereotypes; take Baljit from *Phineas and Ferb* or Ravi from *Jessie* for example. This is alarming considering that early childhood and teenage years are when kids are developing and seeing this content on TV is going to have a huge impact on the way they perceive certain groups of people. An article states "Children more often associate positive

qualities like financial and academic success, leadership and intelligence with white characters, and associate negative qualities like lawbreaking, financial hardship and laziness with minority characters" (CBS News). Characters like Baljit or Ravi, who are protagonists, are portrayed as uptight, straight A students who are pushovers. In addition, both characters have very heavy accents although they have grown up in the US. Ironically, the actor for Ravi, Karan Brar, had to fake his Indian accent as he doesn't have one, just to fit into character.

The first thing I want to delve into is the age demographics these shows are aimed at. *Jessie* and *Phineas and Ferb* are both Disney Channel Shows with quite a large following, and both shows are aimed toward younger kids, aged from around 6-15. This is concerning when put into perspective the developing ages of children and teens, which is the same range. In fact, there have been studies regarding the effect of racial stereotypes on younger children, and the issues that they face later. "Most often, negative emotions such as anger, feeling disrespected and outrage are common following experiences with discrimination,"¹. In addition, the article also states that by the age of 4, children are already aware of skin colors and discrimination based off it, even if they don't fully understand the concept of it. If kids are aware of their skin tone and see how their specific ethnicity is treated on TV, they put themselves into a box and it has long-lasting negative effects on them. This also leads them to be at the receiving end of jokes amongst their peers, such as making fun of the way certain food smells, even though

most of these kids have no clue what their actions mean and are just copying what they see on TV and amongst grown-ups.

In addition, Raj from *The Big Bang Theory* and Apu from *The Simpsons* have personalities that are centered entirely around their ethnicity. Again, Raj is portrayed as a weak and feminine character, unable to speak to women. “The jokes directed at “Raj” are often about Indian culture and language generally (“Save some syllables for the rest of us!”) or about the aforementioned overbearing parents, but often are just shoehorned in for racism’s sake.”². Once again, TV shows have succeeded in portraying South Asian men as incapable of being able to talk to the opposite gender and having fun, instead just making their personality about working and studying, and portraying them as unattractive. As for Apu, once again many of the jokes made about him are at the expense of his heritage and ethnicity. “...But before they do, an agent tells Apu that he has to change his last name when he reveals for the first time it's Nahasapeemapetilon. The agent says it'll never fit on a marquee...”³. This joke reflects the way people make fun of the way Desi names sound, and often make a joke out of their pronunciations and the meaning behind it. All of these situations do more harm than good, adding to the negative perception others have regarding Brown men in general and labeling them as nerdy, clingy, and undesirable amongst others.

These portrayals of South Asian characters also have a huge effect on teenagers, often in a negative context. Stereotypes such as ‘Asians are good at Math’ often lead children of said ethnic groups to believe that they are supposed to be good at one thing as opposed to the other. As James writes in his article “Thus, the stereotypes my English teachers held of Chinese people resulted in an expectation that I was supposed to be good at math, not

English”⁴. This quote perfectly sums up the mental restrictions students must deal with, especially when it comes to education. They start perceiving themselves in the way others do and start questioning themselves when they don’t meet a stereotype that is thrust upon them over and over. If a child grows up watching Ravi from *Jessi* and Baljit from *Phineas and Ferb*, they’re going to automatically assume that much of their identity is based on academics. This in turn discourages them from exploring new things and new fields, as well as feeling bad about themselves when they don’t fit the mold that society has created for them. In a context of racism, stereotyping/racial profiling and discrimination thrive and limit the opportunities and possibilities of young racial minority people.

While exploring this topic, it’s important to notice the general negligence regarding racism when it comes to the South Asian community specifically. A great example of this is *The Simpson’s* firing back at the critical documentary *The Problem with Apu*, made by Hari Kondabolu. In his documentary, Kondabolu criticizes the Indian character and the stereotypes he portrays regarding the South Asian community, citing that ‘it’s okay to criticize something you love’. However, after the documentary was released, directors and writers of *The Simpson’s* took a jab at the criticism instead of utilizing that information to correct their views. Speaking directly to the camera, Lisa says, “It’s hard to say. Something that started decades and was applauded and inoffensive is now politically incorrect. What can you do?” The camera then pans to a portrait of Apu, which has “Don’t have a cow, man!” written on it⁶. Just because something has been the norm for years doesn’t make it right, just as how a law doesn’t equal good morals. The appropriate response would’ve been to reconsider the character traits of Apu and dealt with them in

a professional manner, instead an entire community's feelings were disregarded and labeled as 'being too sensitive'. Negligence like this has allowed people to think behaviors and colorist/racist remarks towards South Asians are okay. Growing up, we've had to consistently deal with derogatory remarks such as 'towel head', 'curry muncher' and generalizing the entire sub-continent, disregarding the fact that it's made up of three different countries and hundreds of different cultures.

It should be noted, however, that Hollywood and TV shows, in general, have made progress in their portrayals of Desi characters on screen in the past few years. A great breakthrough has been the addition of *Ms. Marvel* to the *Marvel Universe*, and her background as a Pakistani-American teenager. The character is a young Pakistani-American girl from Jersey City who obtains superpowers and must defend her city. Regarding her personality, creator Sana Amanat writes "In Kamala's case, we want her to be good because she is a traditional superhero, but we want her to have faults and struggle with the idea of believing in what she has been told"⁵. This is a more accurate portrayal of current teenagers who are of South Asian descent, as it portrays the struggles of growing up as a first-generation child and trying to balance two completely different lifestyles. It was also announced that the TV show was in progress and the lead actress, Iman Vellani, is a teenage Pakistani-American girl. In addition, Mindy Kaling's show *Never Have I Ever* released on Netflix has had a huge following since it first dropped its trailer. Similar to Kamala Khan, the main protagonist Devi is a teenage girl of Indian descent, just cruising through high school and experiencing normal teenage problems. This type of representation has been long-awaited, as many young kids have never seen or related to a character on-screen before. Seeing girls like themselves deal with

the same problems they're dealing with and causing trouble, instead of being reduced to stereotypes such as nerds and introverts resonates with them and allows them to feel normal, just like everybody else.

There has also been a rise in actors and directors of South Asian descent in Hollywood. Mindy Kaling and Sana Amanat have broken grounds as creators and have presented characters in the way they want to be shown. In addition, Riz Ahmed made headlines as the first Pakistani to be nominated for an Oscar. Dev Patel and Hassan Minhaj talk about their struggles as not only South Asians, but as Americans as well. They have helped portray Desi people in a more positive light, and broken stereotypes.

We've seen quite a few examples of negative portrayals when it comes to brown characters, and that's still just on TV. There's so much more to be found and talked about when it comes to movies, books, etc. And it's frustrating because for decades these portrayals were seen as normal and only perpetuated the stereotypes people already had regarding them, dismissing all desi ethnicities as smelly, nerdy, and undesirable. This in turn leads to negative effects on children and creates a general image regarding an entire subcontinent of people which affects their relationships with their peers later in life. And although it is true that Hollywood and respective media have made strides in the past few years, that isn't to say the work is done. "And actors still struggle to get lead roles in mainstream films or work alongside another South Asian actor. And while the critiques by performers like Kondabolu have made waves, it still hasn't been enough to take down one of the most racist characters on mainstream television"⁷. There is still much to be explored, and so many more roles can be created for South Asians on screen. Hopefully, we will get to

see this play out in the coming years, and we've already started with small steps.

References:

- [1] *Psychologist: By age 4, children aware of racial stereotypes.* Hartford HealthCare | CT. (n.d.). Retrieved April 16, 2022, from <https://hartfordhealthcare.org/about-us/news-press/news-detail?articleid=26522&publicId=395>.
- [2] Manavis, S., Bush, S., Harrison, A., Spotlight, Corcoran, M., Sarah Manavis @sarahmanavis Sarah Manavis is a senior wri, Manavis, S., & Sarah Manavis is a senior writer at The New Statesman. (2022, April 4). *The Big Bang Theory is a plague on society – we should rejoice in its overdue end.* New Statesman. Retrieved April 16, 2022, from <https://www.newstatesman.com/culture/tv-radio/2018/08/big-bang-theory-plague-society-we-should-rejoice-its-overdue-end>.
- [3] Welk, B. (2018, August 4). *15 'simpsons' episodes that stirred the APU stereotype conversation (photos).* TheWrap. Retrieved April 16, 2022, from <https://www.thewrap.com/simpsons-apu-stereotype-conversation-15-episodes-photos/>.
- [4] *Stereotyping and its consequence for racial minority youth.* Stereotyping and its consequence for racial minority youth | Ontario Human Rights Commission. (n.d.). Retrieved April 16, 2022, from <https://www.ohrc.on.ca/en/race-policy-dialogue-papers/stereotyping-and-its-consequence-racial-minority-youth>
- [5] Arun Dev / TNN / Updated: Sep 15, 2014. (n.d.). *'American Muslims were proud of Kamala Khan': Bengaluru News - Times of India.* The Times of India. Retrieved April 16, 2022, from <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/bengaluru/American-Muslims-were-proud-of-Kamala-Khan/articleshow/42473218.cms>
- [6] Jackson, G. (2018, April 9). *The Simpsons pokes fun at documentary that criticized Apu.* Kotaku. Retrieved April 16, 2022, from <https://kotaku.com/the-simpsons-pokes-fun-at-documentary-that-criticized-a-1825105222>
- [7] *South Asian actors are fighting Hollywood's racism.* VICE. (n.d.). Retrieved April 16, 2022, from <https://www.vice.com/en/article/paxx4n/south-asian-actors-are-fighting-hollywoods-racism>