Indian Americans In Film

To say that race and racism has been one of the most important and talked about subjects in the United States over the past hundred years would most likely still be an understatement. In the modern day United States, there are a vast number of different ethnicities with unique and distinct cultures that help to make up the amalgamated culture that is “The United States”. With media taking up such a huge space in the majority of peoples lives the issue of representation has become directly linked with the effort to identify and stop racism. Television has consistently been one of the most important forms of media for the past 60 plus years. As a kid, I would very rarely see Indian americans on television. Furthermore, when I would see Indians in mainstream TV, the characters they were cast as were usually either offensive stereotype ridden portrayals or meaningless non-dialogue extras. The shows that did have accurate portrayals usually had more than one indian actors in meaningful roles and therefore were often deemed “an Indian show”. It seemed clear in my mind that Indians did not occupy the same space in television as their white counterparts and that It was an issue of representation. After noticing this as a young kid, I for a long time didn't think about it until during this class when I was given the opportunity to investigate it further. Several exercises such as writing down identities that define us helped me realize how much this identity means to me and that it was a unique opportunity to explore. I sought out to answer the question; How have Indian Americans been portrayed in North American television over that last 15 years?

The show “How I Met Your Mother” (2005) was a successful series that appealed to a wide range of mostly United States viewers. The series finale drew 12.9 million people to their T.V.s to see how it would all go down. The show follows in the footsteps of the trendsetting predecessors like “Seinfeld” and “Friends” albeit in more than one crucial way. It features an entirely white core cast. Growing up, How I Met Your Mother was the epitome of an average, popular show that people at my school would watch and talk about. The anatomy of the show, like those that preceded it, was based around the ridiculous but somewhat ordinary lives of a group of friends living in New York. The show is almost laughably inaccurate in its representation of the diversity of New York. The most prominent Indian character is the clumsy, dumb and well meaning cab driver; Ranjit. Not surprisingly a taxi/limo driver, Ranjit waits hand and foot for the core cast to drive them all over New York. The characters don’t necessarily treat
him poorly yet he is always shown as overly enthusiastic to tend to there every need. He rarely has any substantive ideas of his own that offer meaningful dialogue of plot development within the narrative of the show. I remember that whenever I would watch H.I.M.Y.M, I hated him and hated seeing him. I would get embarrassed if my parents walked in and saw me watching the show while Ranjit was being shown. To me, he represent everything that was wrong and stereotypical portrayals of Indian Americans across a broad range of television shows.

How I Met Your Mother in many ways shows North American television at its worst. The blatant disregard for any attempt at diversity was viewed as a light hearted comedy that mustn’t be analyzed critically due to its genre. While I reject this counterargument, the numbers show that viewers didn’t pay me any mind. The show enjoyed good viewership over its lifespan, and most importantly I couldn’t find one article published by a major publication, while the show was on air, questioning its laughable extreme under representation of people of color and more specifically offensive portrayals of Indian Americans. Racism existed within in it and thrived comfortably.

In 2017, “The Indian Detective” came onto Netflix. Created in part by Russell Peters a first generation Canadian Indian, the Indian Detective features him in the starring role. He has meaningful dialogue throughout the series and the viewer is left empathizing with him in meaningful ways throughout the light hearted detective/comedy show. This was a far cry from the Indian American portrayal of Ranjit in How I Met Your Mother. However upon further analysis “The Indian Detective” does little to kick or change stereotypes of Indians in the media. There are many small problematic points that highlight the brutal past of racism in western television. The mere title of the film is problematic. Could you image a series titled “The White Detective”. In the U.S. or European countries this would be almost unfathomable. The need for differentiation in the title is telling about the intended audience and the previous climate of media in this arena. One way to view the title is almost as some sort of disclaimer. “Hey its a detective show.. but be warned.. he’s Indian!” The show often derails into monolithic identities of some Indian cast members for the sake of comedy and or irony. The show makes no attempt to tackle racial, social or political issues head on. Instead, it just “is”.
However, I believe that its important to analyze this show not only on its specific faults or successes, but rather in terms of what it does for the canon of major, mainstream television that has some level of Indian portrayal in it. The second way of analyzing the show is one that takes into account the history of Indian portrayals in media and looks at the show through a wider albeit more forgiving lens. “The Indian Detective” is a major show, released on Netflix, intended for an American/Canadian English speaking audience starring an Indian male and a majority Indian supporting cast. This is extremely rare. I think the benefit of “The Indian Detective” must be viewed in its mediocrity. The fact that a mediocre light hearted show viewed by a large mainstream audience stars an Indian protagonist is important. We have seen hundreds of mediocre shows starring white actors with token P.O.C.’s on the side, but to have a mediocre, non-challenging show starring a majority Indian cast is actually quite important. I’ll take it... I guess.

The third show I analyzed is “Master of None”. Master of None” is an ongoing Netflix series originally released in 2015 created by Aziz Ansari and Alan Yang. Its interesting to look at Master of None as an updated version of the shows like How I Met Your Mother, Friends and Seinfeld. Updated in the sense that it is much more truthful to the diversity of a place like New York and the show casts accordingly. The creators try to give a personal but also honest and reflective portrayal of what life in New York is like for not only Aziz but the rest of the characters. In Master of None one of the “hooks” is the innate and also natural individuality of the cast. The show also makes an effort to bring up and display the most talked about political and social issues of our time, for example race, sexual assault, income inequality and more. One of the selling points for me being interested in Master of None was the “unique” cast. In reality the cast is essentially a typical and standard representation of New York. The main character is Indian, his two best friends are a lesbian black woman, a Chinese man and a “non aggressively” masculine white friend. Entire episodes are go by where the majority of the cast are all different
being cast in demeaning and stereotypical roles such as cab drivers and convenience store clerks. The ironic (or not) thing being that the nature of the actors roles in that episode is a shift in the spectrum in terms of indian representation in the media. To me this is one of the key triumphs of Master of None. The fact that they tackle race head on is rewarding but I believe it is equally vital that they casted Indians living “normal” millennial lives and dealing with the “complex” struggles and rewards of life that white actors have been cast doing for 50 years. The show’s basis is somewhat successful as an effort to “right” the countless amount of popular straight ahead, light hearted, syrupy, entirely white tv sitcoms that have followed before it.

When looking over these 3 shows its easy to say that things are better. My belief is that the portrayal of Indian American in T.V. is getting better thanks to creators and producers of color bringing their identities into mainstream television. It is my belief that the more there is equal representation behind the camera, the more will show up in front of it.

Learning Moments:
I set out to do this research with a biased opinion based on my own experience of being an Indian and watching television in the United States. I was reminded to always think bout my explicit biases and this helped my in my analysis of “The Indian Detective.” my initial felling was to deem the show a complete success because it was personally exciting to see show with a indian protagonist, but upon further reflection I realized it’s shortcomings with only enhanced my analysis. One of my other most important learning moments came from doing more in depth research about how the shows are made and who is a part of making them. Not surprisingly the two shows that feature Indians and people of color in meaningful positive ways, have Indian or P.O.C’s listed as directors, producers or writers. How I Met Your Mother however does not boast the same diversity in its core crew members. The overarching message that was transmitted to me through this research was that shows like Master of None and to a slightly lesser extent, The Indian Detective, are paving the way for a different and more humane, realistic and correct portrayal of Indians in mainstream western television.


Ansari, Aziz. “Master Of None.” *Master Of None*, created by Alan Yang, Netflix, 6 Nov. 2015.
