

Whiteness as Escapism & the De-Romanticization of the Brown Body

By Ramin Raza

The error is not to conceptualize [white] presence in terms of power, but to locate that power as wholly external to us — as extrinsic force, whose influence can be thrown off like the serpent sheds its skin... Every narration places the spectator in a position of agency: and race, class and sexual relations influence the way in which this subjecthood is filled by the spectator.

— bell hooks in *The Oppositional Gaze*

INTRODUCTION

At their regularly scheduled weekend lunch, a Pakistani family sits around a handsome dining table eating their fill of pulao, nihari, and naan. Kumail Nanjiani sits across his brother and sister-in-law, engaging in banter about the modishness of beards, his career as a stand-up comedian, and interracial dating. When Kumail's mother sends him to the basement to pray, we see Kumail set a timer for 5 minutes — roughly the time it would take a Muslim to pray *Zuhr*, the midday prayer in Islam — and we look on as he fills the time watching YouTube videos on his phone. Kumail returns to the dining table when the doorbell rings and in walks a young Pakistani woman, her eyes wide and slightly wild with expectation. Zubaida takes a seat next to Kumail and gives him a collection of papers and pictures of her, as if this is something routine. She jokes that these papers are for his files, "*his X files*," she clarifies — because that is his favorite TV show. She then proceeds to yell the show's signature phrase, "*The truth is out there!*" as if she cannot control herself. Despite growing up in America like Kumail, somehow Zubaida has an accent while Kumail does not (Deb). She is somehow socially awkward to American customs while Kumail is not. We see Kumail drop Zubaida's photos into a box in his room filled with photos of other young, single Pakistani women that he is simply just... not interested in.

The scene from Kumail Nanjiani's *The Big Sick* is meant to be funny. Nanjiani's father and mother comically fit the many stereotypes associated with Pakistani parents. His older brother serves as the traditional, somewhat socially awkward, prized child who works a steady job, is devout, and is happy with his arranged marriage. As Nanjiani tells his life story on the big screen, he also gives white America a glimpse into a "real" South Asian, Muslim family post-9/11. He uses humor in a way that signals: *Hey, we're not all terrorists. We bicker at the dining table, too.* Nanjiani's work falls within an era of emerging South Asians gaining traction in the media and sharing their experiences and perspectives on race and romance. Among them include Aziz Ansari, Hasan Minhaj, Hari Kondabolu, and Mindy Kaling — all of whom are attempting to shift away from the geeky representations of "Brownness" and are redefining what it means to be South Asian American. What is troublesome about these narratives, however, is not their experiences or stories but rather the stylistic choices in which Desi, or "Brownness," is represented. In Ansari's *Master of None*, Nanjiani's *The Big Sick*, and Minhaj's *Homecoming King*, South Asian women and families are routinely reduced to comedic punchlines, stereotypes, or sidelines to plot. They lack the nuance, balance, or depth given to white characters and are often used to forward the Desi male protagonist's character arc of self-discovery in a largely white, racialized world. Nanjiani's *The Big Sick*, however, takes the cake in the way that Desi women are totalized as singular and dramatic characters fixated on marriage — ultimately serving as a symbol for the cultural limitations Nanjiani feels trapped by, and as foils to the film's charming, dainty, white female protagonist.

In the following essay, I use bell hooks' *The Oppositional Gaze* as a theoretical lens to analyze the political and cultural forces driving whiteness as escapism and the de-romanticization of the Brown body. I begin by tracing the history of South Asians in America and employ the "oppositional gaze" in my criticism of early representations of South

Asians in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. In employing the oppositional gaze as a Desi woman, my studies examine the construction of “the Brown identity” by whiteness and the problem of attempting to redefine South Asian identity in tangent to whiteness as a racial-cultural-political system. In this piece, I critique representations of Brownness, meditate on power, desirability politics, and what it means to be Desi in America today.

THE OPPOSITIONAL GAZE

In her 1992 critical essay, *The Oppositional Gaze*, bell hooks discusses the power of spectatorship in media to either affirm or resist constructions of identity and power. hooks begins the piece by exploring the history and implications of the “gaze” for Black men — how Black men were punished and are still punished to this day for simply looking upon whiteness. hooks’ essay shows its audience how a white, male gaze has structured a society that operates through power relations and defines whiteness through the creation of an “Other”. If Black men are threatening or violent, then white men must be saviors. If Latino men are criminal and lazy, then white men must be decent and hard-working. If Asian men are submissive and “feminine,” then white men must be assertive and manly. If South Asian men are geeky and socially awkward, then white men must be desirable. If Muslim men are sexist and extremist, then white men must be progressive and safe. Such systematic othering shows how the racialization of people of color is often far less a societal effect than it is a creation by white masculinity to protect, serve, and define itself. To myself as a reader, this shows that conversations about policing, border security, national security, and anti-immigration are in fact all the same conversation posited by the sheer sociopolitical power of the white gaze. That it is not white people or Americans who need protecting, but rather whiteness itself.

Such racial power relations and conflicts take place on the axis of masculinity and in turn

materialize onto the woman's body — creating a gender-racialized intersection and experience for womxn of color. bell hooks uses Michel Foucault's relations of power theory and applies it to spectatorship and the ways in which media and the gaze have the power to shape identity, power, and sense of self. She bases *The Oppositional Gaze* from her analysis of Black female spectatorship in media. hooks writes:

Black female spectators have had to develop looking relations within a cinematic context that constructs our presence as absence, that denies the “body” of the black female so as to perpetuate white supremacy... Black female spectators, who refused to identify with white womanhood, who would not take on the phallogentric gaze of desire and possession, created a critical space... To stare at the television, or mainstream movies, to engage its images, was to engage its negation of black representation.

bell hooks cites film and texts such as *The Bluest Eye* and interviews Black women who speak on their experiences of engaging with media and film where they do not see themselves existing. In the piece, she elucidates how the white phallogentric gaze historically has created conceptions of Black femininity and Black masculinity through which whiteness defines itself. In most film and media, the white female body serves as the object of possession for white men and the white male gaze, and hooks explains that Black female spectatorship is inherently oppositional in the way that it does not exist in white-dominated media and denies whiteness. In other words, it is incapable of serving as an object of the white phallogentric gaze because of the way Black womanhood at its core problematizes white representations of beauty, femininity, and identity by its very marginal existence. Such begins an oppositional process where Black female artists and filmmakers create not within, but outside of whiteness in order to decentralize its power, its oppression, and to “know the present and invent the future”.

Such oppositional perspectives do not yet exist for South Asian Americans despite their own issues with and absence from American media until about the late 20th and early 21st

centuries. Some of the earliest representations of South Asians as more central characters in American media include Apu from *The Simpsons*, Raj from *The Big Bang Theory*, and Baljeet from *Phineas and Ferb* — all of whom serve mainly to affirm whiteness as the societal and cultural norm. Directed and written mainly by white people, these representations further stereotypes about South Asian people and totalize South Asian Americans, characterizing them as socially awkward and undesirable. South Asian Muslim men, on the other hand, are often cast as suspicious and are portrayed singularly as terrorists as seen in productions such as *Iron Man*, *24*, and *Zero Dark Thirty*. Kumail Nanjiani, Aziz Ansari, Hasan Minhaj, Hari Kondabolu, and Mindy Kaling are some of the first South Asians to create their own representations in American media today. However, many of these narratives starring South Asians affirm whiteness as the cultural norm, or wholly exclude and caricaturize South Asian women. I argue that these new perspectives are far from oppositional in the way that they operate within whiteness and create a South Asian racial narrative centered on erasure rather than reclamation of power. As we have seen in Nanjiani's *The Big Sick*, today's representations of South Asian characters largely reinforce negative stereotypes about Brown people that implicitly reaffirm whiteness as the idealized standard, replicate, and/or ignore matters such as gender inequality and anti-Blackness. Given the history of the Brown body in America as one that has been othered, vilified, de-romanticized, and depersonalized, it is not difficult to imagine why so many South Asians — both in media and society today — navigate whiteness as escapism and reproduce the very power structures they seek to escape. Such a phenomenon creates a compensating effect in which South Asian Americans must perpetually distance themselves from their cultural selves and co-opt whiteness — or Blackness — in exchange for power, desirability, and acceptance. Today's media

representations of South Asian Americans exhibit such problematic behavior through narratives of self-discovery and romance where a pursuit of whiteness as escapism is the way in which characters become self-actualized. While an oppositional perspective certainly exists in lesser-known works such as Fatimah Asghar's *Brown Girls* and Instagram art by Desi artists, today's mainstream media has not yet seen South Asian figures who have recognized whiteness as an "extrinsic force, whose influence can be thrown off like the serpent sheds its skin". Because media influences and reflects the ways in which people identify, I argue that at this point in American history, a vast majority of South Asians have not yet achieved true agency, self-actualization, authenticity, or power.

THE HISTORY OF SOUTH ASIAN AMERICANS

It is impossible to understand South Asian American representations in film and media without first understanding history. Though the presence of South Asians in America has been perceived to be relatively young, South Asians are noted to have been in the United States since the 1700s; their larger presence, however, begins around the late 1800s and early 1900s (Samip). Early South Asian settlers hailed from agricultural families fleeing heavy taxation in British Punjab, settling in what is now California, Washington, and Oregon. Others included migrants from Bengal who jumped ship and left the East India company to settle on the East Coast. Since colonial times, South Asians have existed in America as field laborers, peddlers, merchants, and traders (Samip). Living conditions for South Asian migrants and laborers, however, were often difficult with growing anti-immigration sentiments rising in the 19th and 20th centuries. South Asians were often victims of legal discrimination such as ineligibility from naturalization, citizenship, and owning land or property (Samip). As migration to the states increased in the 1800s, South Asians saw an uptick in violence and hate crimes —

typically for their strong non-Christian religious values and their anti-colonial mentalities in a country expanding Westward. In my research exploring the online South Asian American Digital Archive, I found that the early 1900s brought a wave of anti-South Asian sentiment with news articles titled: “Hindus Scared By Plan To Oust Them” (1906), “The Hindu Invasion: A New Immigration Problem” (1907), “Begin Hindu Murder Trial” (1908), “‘Rag Heads’ - A Picture of America’s East Indians” (1922), and “Here’s Letter To The World From Suicide” (1928). In “Here’s Letter To The World From Suicide,” Vaishno Das Bagai explains his suicide as protest against American naturalization laws that stripped him of personhood.

Bagai writes:

But they come to me and say, I am no longer an American citizen. They will not permit me to buy my home and, lo, they even shall not issue me a passport to go back to India. Now what am I? What have I made of myself and my children? We cannot exercise our rights, we cannot leave this country. Humility and insults, who is responsible for all this? Myself and American government. I do not choose to live the life of an interned person; yes, I am in a free country and can move about where and when I wish inside the country. Is life worth living in a gilded cage? Obstacles this way, blockades that way, and the bridges burnt behind. Yes, you can call me a coward in one respect, that I did not try to break the mountain with my naked head and fists (Bagai).

Bagai’s story is one of a fractured existence created by political barriers to citizenship and economic opportunity. Discriminatory practices denied Bagai any semblance of autonomy and personhood as a South Asian man who worked hard in an American system to make ends meet. Bagai’s story shows that lack of assimilation and conformity to whiteness meant the risk of deportation, displacement, and legal discrimination making life far more difficult.

The Civil Rights Act of 1964 paved way for the Immigration Act of 1965, which radically changed immigration quotas and policies and opened migration from countries that were previously prohibited from entering the United States (Hajela). The 1980s later brought an influx of South Asians pursuing higher education, beginning newer stereotypes around

South Asian American identity as nerdiness and the model minority. In reality, South Asian Americans historically have been as much students and intellectuals as they have been business owners and lower-class laborers. Discrimination towards South Asians and other immigrants only increased after 9/11 with the creation of the Patriot Act and the Department of Homeland Security, while I.C.E. Deportation proceedings began for thousands of Muslim-Americans and hate crimes targeted towards Muslims and Sikhs reached an all-time high. Despite the dynamic histories and experiences of South Asian Americans, one thing that has been constant is the ways in which South Asians have been “othered”, subjugated, and pathologized based on their religious and ethnic differences as well as their deviance from whiteness. As we see in Bagai’s letter, the perpetual fear of displacement and denial of full personhood as an already displaced person created a fractured existence in which adopting and adapting to a white sociopolitical system was not only the sole means of survival, but also something that felt necessary yet was practically impossible. Ultimately, Bagai preferred death to living in such a “gilded cage”.

The stigmatization of South Asian Americans to this day creates a compensating effect within the Desi subject in which they must fluently engage in the erasure of one’s cultural self for the illusion of power, safety, and desirability. Placing oneself in proximity to whiteness not only necessitates erasure but reinforces a system that distances marginalized people from one another and reproduces issues such as gender inequality and anti-Blackness.

REPRESENTATIONS IN MEDIA: DE-ROMANTICIZATION

On a sociopolitical level, Desi-Americans still experience setbacks through policies on immigration and national security. These discriminatory practices paired with a history of xenophobia in America inevitably appear in media as culture as well — often casting

Desi-Americans as awkward, socially incompetent, undesirable, or extremist and violent when Muslim. In my early years in the states, I distinctly remember my brother returning from playing outside after the children in the neighborhood ran from him, claiming he must be a terrorist. I also remember the way he looked at white girls as if being with them was a life he could not have, or the way that his friends joked about his features, ethnic-religious and class background, and demeanor as if this were symbolic for incompetence. Teachers accused us often of cheating on our own work, while confrontations with the police let my family know early on that as non-citizens comprising less than 1% of the population, adaptive erasure of ourselves as South Asian Muslims was the closest and most conceivable option for our survival.

Coming across bell hooks' *The Oppositional Gaze*, I began to examine representations in history, culture, and the media productions with resistance due to an inability to recognize myself in it. Outside of an international context including the success of Bollywood and The Beatles rather odd obsessions with India, America itself lacked Desi-American representation until the 1990s and early 2000s. During this time, Apu from *The Simpsons* was the only real figure representing Desi-Americans — who, according to Hari Kondabolu in *The Problem with Apu* — was a caricature and minstrel at best. In his 2017 documentary film, Kondabolu talks about how he and several other prominent Desi actors were often compared to Apu in their childhoods, and perceived comments by white people such as Apu's signature "Thank you, come again," as racial slurs. Apu came to represent a singular and totalizing representation of Desi culture in America, where his accent was exaggerated with dramatic rolled R's spoken by white narrator, Harry Shearer — something that many critics today are now calling Brown-face given a history of white violence on South Asian people. Despite

being one of the few sane, and hard-working characters in the show, Apu's background and identity are often used for comedic effect with repeated and rather unoriginal jokes in the show about India's population size, curry, elephants, gods with many arms, and arranged marriages (Welk). In many ways, the humor surrounding Apu's identity is a continuation of the pathologization of South Asian Americans — made light in television shows and movies for the sake of “comedy” — but not too distant from the same reasons that discriminatory policies on immigration and national security exist. Because of the rhetorical ways in which humor operates, however, the rather jarring problem with representations like Apu in media and society is de-contextualized from its dangerous and sometimes even violent nature. Instead, it is trivialized and de-legitimized as a problem for the sake of “comedy”.

Other examples of pathologization and de-romanticization of the Brown body include Raj from *The Big Bang Theory*, Baljeet from *Phineas and Ferb*, and the Parvati twins from *Harry Potter*. South Asian Muslims, on the other hand, take on more violent and suspicious stereotypes in productions about crime and American heroism. In the *Big Bang Theory*, Raj plays a geeky and awkward character from India. What is troubling about Rajesh, however, is not his nerdiness in a show about nerds, but rather how he is stripped of any semblance of voice, sexuality, and character development in comparison to other white characters on the show. At a time where everyone else is dating and falling in love, it is only Raj who cannot get a girlfriend. Raj is unable to talk to girls when sober and in one episode, we see him fall in love with the voice of Siri while Sheldon experiences real character development and growth as he begins to date Amy. Raj falling in love with the voice of Siri while also considering marriage to Lakshmi, a closeted lesbian attempting to escape an arranged Indian marriage to a straight man, is frankly, not funny. It's just sad. Not only this, but it makes love seem like an

impossible endeavor for South Asians — when this is far from the reality — due to a lack of desirability and an oversimplified understanding of arranged marriages as a cultural practice.

In other media representations, we see Baljeet serve as the neighborhood socially awkward kid who is bullied by Buford; despite growing up in America like the rest of his neighbors, Baljeet is the only kid with an accent on the show. In the film adaptation of *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*, Harry and Ron are unable to find dates to the Yule Ball, and when they cannot successfully ask Fleur Delacour, a blonde, French girl, and Cho Chang, a pretty, East Asian girl, they are forced to settle with the Parvati twins as their respective dates — who wear not dress robes like every other wizard at the ball, but saris. At the ball, Harry and Ron are not happy to be there with the twins, and the scene is meant to create comedic effect like many other scenes including Desis, where Harry and Ron are sporting ugly hand-me-down robes and are so embarrassed that they refuse to dance with the girls at the ball. Such plot, stylistic, and directive choices used in depictions of South Asian characters like Apu, Raj, Baljeet, and the Parvati twins are wildly simplistic, totalizing, and offensively reductive. I also argue that these representational choices are not mere accidents, but intentional. Desi portrayals in media and film are exaggerated as excessively foreign for seemingly no reason other than humor and to support the narrative arc of its white, mostly male leads. Not only this, but such media representations reinforce for Desis and non-Desis alike, ideas of desirability politics and racial identity. Comedy serves to de-romanticize the Brown body while Desi-Muslims in productions like *24* and *Iron Man* are cast as suspicious through directive choices that exaggerate uses of dark lighting, Arab accents, normal and peaceful religious terms like “Allahu Akbar,” and scenes in which women are oppressed to create foils for white, male protagonists who serve as the heroes.

The de-romanticization of the Brown body thus operates through mechanisms of pathologization and vilification in order to laud and protect whiteness. It is not just important but necessary to understand the mechanisms and power structures through which marginalized groups are othered in order to reclaim power, create, and reinvent ourselves as liberated and self-actualized. In recent years, we have seen Black Americans break these barriers through political movements such as Black Lives Matter, as well as the rise of rap, fashion, and film centering Black narratives written, created, and directed by Black people, for Black people. For South Asian Americans, however, the work of writers, actors, and producers like Kumail Nanjiani, Hasan Minhaj, Aziz Ansari, and Mindy Kaling only serve as a response or reaction *to* whiteness rather than as narratives about South Asian American life and identity outside of whiteness entirely.

REPRESENTATIONS IN MEDIA: WHITENESS AS ESCAPISM

Given a history of de-romanticization of Brownness in media and society, it is no wonder that today's existing mainstream representations of Desi-Americans are often South Asian men who co-opt or chase whiteness through plots about romance and self-discovery. What is problematic about Kumail Nanjiani's *The Big Sick* is not the way that he falls in love with a white woman, but rather the ways in which he offensively and reductively represents his family and Desi women as stereotypes, punchlines, and character foils in his narrative arc for self-discovery in a white world. It is not that Nanjiani is required to talk about racial politics and identity to be deemed morally or politically correct in his work, rather it is the way he reaffirms whiteness as power in how he seeks its approval and puts down South Asian women and culture in the process. Aziz Ansari in *Master of None* does something similar, where he plays "the nice guy" in his pursuit of romance where he almost serially and

exclusively dates white women. In her *Jezebel* essay, writer Aditi Natasha Kini criticizes Brown male comedians who “hold white media accountable for under-representation of Brown people, yet seem to be casting non-Brown women in the meatiest roles”. She points out the plot lines in *The Big Sick* and *Master of None* as mere “masturbatory fantasies that give Brown men the vantage point of a white male cinephile” (Kini). Through romance, whiteness serves as a route for escapism where the white female body represents an outlet or destination of beauty and glamor that South Asians (and South Asian men in particular) have been historically and systematically denied. Meanwhile, stories of South Asian culture, or Desi-Americans who take genuine pride in their roots and do not seek to escape them are rarely given voice. Navigating whiteness as escapism and distancing from the cultural self in works like *The Big Sick* and *Master of None* are perhaps a mere reaction to the exclusion of Brown people in American romance and happily-ever-afters. Rather than creating their own, these characters co-opt a white worldview of reality. It ultimately begs the question, are we really unable to tell South Asian stories without grounding them in whiteness?

In *The Mindy Project*, Mindy Kaling’s character also dates mostly white men, but she never puts down her people or her culture. Instead, she casts nuance on racial issues, dedicating one episode to the concept of “coconut” in Desi-American culture — or the idea of being Brown on the outside, white on the inside. When Neel, another Indian, calls Mindy a coconut she takes it to heart and asks her brother, Rishi, if he agrees. Rishi replies to her, “You think you’re white and I think I’m Black. We skipped over that whole steez” (La). In this episode, the audience is exposed to Desi-Americans’ assimilation to either whiteness or Blackness. Much of today’s Desi youth co-opt whiteness or Blackness for a sense of clout, respect, and desirability in a society where this does not wholly exist for Brown-Americans

yet. Caught between a Black-or-white racial binary in America, many Desi-Americans simply choose which experience they resonate most with but are rarely seen creating power and identity for themselves outside of Blackness or whiteness. However, like other mainstream productions created by South Asian Americans, *The Mindy Project* depicts a South Asian lead experiencing self-discovery through whiteness as escapism and romance — thereby reaffirming whiteness as the dominant culture and the idealized norm. Perhaps this is why productions like *The Big Sick*, *Master of None*, and *The Mindy Project* have such traction in mainstream, white, American media. Perhaps these figures and productions are chosen because of the way we love engaging with representations in which we are reaffirmed. We love to see that those who we perceived to be different from us are actually, *just like us*. And thus, white America's inability to apply an oppositional gaze to itself — its inability and resistance to introspect and self-criticize — creates institutions that perpetuate whiteness and maintain power through gatekeeping oppositional perspectives that are capable of success.

CONCLUSION

As of today, few Desi productions exist in which South Asian Americans challenge whiteness for what it is — oppressive and limiting. There are also few existing productions that depict the Desi-American experience as nuanced, varied, complex, or unapologetically Brown. According to hooks, artistic works that employ an oppositional gaze throw off the influence of whiteness as an “extrinsic force... like the serpent sheds its skin”. These works, however, have not yet appeared on a more mainstream level and are found on smaller platforms like Instagram, YouTube, or even smaller web series like Fatimah Asghar's *Brown Girls*, which features a predominantly Black, Brown, and Queer friend group as they navigate the complexities of relationships with family, friends, self, and love. In concluding *The*

Oppositional Gaze, bell hooks claims that self-actualized power, or cultural citizenship, “concerns the maintenance and development of cultural lineage through education, custom, language, and religion and the positive acknowledgement of difference in and by the mainstream”. As more Desi-Americans — particularly those who are women and Queer — tell their stories and create art, the closer we get to mainstream representation and to true cultural citizenship. In such a world, we begin to see more variance and nuance in terms of what it means to be Desi-American, absent of conformity to anything but ourselves.

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