

**REAL AND IMAGINED IMMIGRANT IDENTITIES IN THE PUBLIC SPHERE:
REPRESENTATIONS OF SOUTH ASIAN WOMEN IN LITERARY AND
TELEVISION MEDIA**

By Chitra Panjabi

B.A. (Hons), August 2005, King's College London, University of London

M.A., March 2007, City University London

A Thesis submitted to

The Faculty of
The Columbian College of Arts and Sciences
of The George Washington University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts

August 31, 2010

Thesis directed by

Todd Ramlow
Professor of Women's Studies

Kavita Daiya
Associate Professor of English

**© Copyright 2010 by Chitra Panjabi
All rights reserved**

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author wishes to thank her thesis director, Todd Ramlow, and thesis reader, Kavita Daiya for their words of encouragement, invaluable advice and, most importantly, all the wonderful conversations that have occurred over the life of this project. The author also wishes to thank her family and friends for their love and support over the course of her academic career and PBD for always being there.

ABSTRACT OF THESIS

Real And Imagined Immigrant Identities In The Public Sphere: Representations Of South Asian Women In Literary And Television Media

The purpose of this project is to explore representations of South Asian immigrant women in the media, and the implications of those representations. Grounding this project's analysis in the theoretical frameworks of neoliberal theory and the feminist media critiques of representations of women of color appearing in visual media, allowed for an examination of South Asian immigrant women characters appearing on current fictional television shows and in popular fictional literature in the United States. The analysis revealed that while South Asian women did not adhere to the stereotypes that were historically attributed to women of color, they did function within the parameters of a new stereotype – the idealized immigrant citizen, or “the model minority”. Representations of South Asian immigrant women in the media as model immigrant citizens not only create further racial stratification between minorities, but also erase the diversity of the larger South Asian community.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements.....	iii
Abstract of Thesis.....	iv
Table of Contents.....	v
Chapter 1: Introduction.....	1
Chapter 2: Representations in the Public Sphere.....	11
Chapter 3: Assimilation and Immigrant Politics in Lahiri's <i>Interpreter of Maladies</i>	17
Chapter 4: Rescuing the Brown Woman in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's <i>Arranged Marriage</i>	25
Chapter 5: Assimilation and Emancipation: Representations of Immigrant Women.....	29
Chapter 6: Beyond Literature.....	31
Chapter 7: Representations of Women of Color in Mainstream Television Media..	32
Chapter 8: The Implications for South Asian Women on Television.....	36
Chapter 9: How Television Media Represents South Asian American Women.....	51
Chapter 10: Neoliberalism and Multicultural Representations.....	56
Chapter 11: South Asian Americans as First-Class Citizens.....	62
Chapter 12: Conclusion.....	64
Works Cited.....	66

Chapter 1:

Introduction

The scene: a daughter brings her boyfriend to a social gathering celebrating a religious holiday. Her parents, turned off by the idea of their daughter dating someone who is only an office temp and makes no money, argue with her and push her to date a financially stable and successful doctor, the son of a family friend. “He’s so handsome, you two are the perfect match,” insists the mother. The daughter responds shrilly, “Ugh, you really think I want to date a doctor?” The scene is played for laughs because the family in question is South Asian, and after all, aren’t all South Asian parents trying to marry their daughters off to doctors or other “suitable boys” in arranged marriages? The writers of this scene assume that the audience will have some familiarity with dominant stereotypes of South Asian culture, customs and traditions. However, the ones that they choose to display in this particular scene rely on stereotypes of South Asians as doctors, South Asian parents as pushing arranged marriages, and South Asians as only valuing financial success. We, the audience, are supposed to find it funny when the daughter rejects their matchmaking, not because she is in love with her boyfriend, but because she responds to their arguments in such an absurd manner – she does not want to date a doctor, because what woman wants to date a successful, possibly wealthy, man?

The above scene is from the popular prime-time television show, *The Office*, and is just one of many examples that currently populate the sphere of literature and pop culture that reinforce stereotypes about South Asian immigrants within the United States. The exploration of the South Asian immigrant identity, both real and imagined, is the

focus of this paper. This paper will examine the representations of South Asian women in literature and on fictional television programs. Through an analysis of two collections of short stories, and four characters on different television shows, this paper will show that these representations not only reflect how South Asian immigrants might imagine themselves and understand their place within the context of the normative sphere of American life but also how the dominant culture within the United States views the immigrant subject, its significance and place within the dominant, normative culture and narrative.

The articulation of the immigrant as a gendered, raced subject within multiple US cultural contexts is a focus of Inderpal Grewal's work, *Transnational America*, most particularly for my purposes here in her dissection of literary works by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni and Bharati Mukherjee (both ethnic Bengali, Indian American female writers). In her analysis of the mobile female subject emigrating from South Asia to the US, Grewal speaks of the common colonial and neo-colonial trope of the brown woman needing to be rescued by white men and women from the brown man (59). Narratives of female immigrant identities, and especially South Asian female identities, revolve around this idea of movement from the subjugation and oppressions within a patriarchal non-Western/Other social structure to a free life of agency and independence in the liberal, Western world. As Grewal argues, the neoliberal idea of choice and freedom is what documents the movement of the female immigrant in fictional narratives – it is the move from the oppressed to the freedom of making choices which appear as liberating and modern. This move also informs the migrant story, of one with no choices to one with many choices. Therefore it is this metric of “choice” that frames and constructs how the

dominant culture understands the immigrant's story and how the immigrant herself is directed to shape and relate "her" own story. However, it is not only this ideal of freedom, or choice, that shapes representations of the female South Asian immigrants in the public sphere, but also the ideas of assimilation and multiculturalism.

These two themes may seem to contradict each other. After all, the ability to choose how to live or create your own immigrant identity seems antithetical to the concept of assimilation. Assimilation necessarily asks that the immigrant or new citizen adopt the normative practices of their new home. However, when we consider Grewal's analysis of freedom and choice, as defined by neoliberal dogma, it must include assimilation to life in the United States as defined by the neoliberal and therefore capitalist idea of being able to make choices – the right choices. Neoliberal ideology requires that the choices you make as a "good" citizen are ones that are normative and acceptable to the dominant culture. Financial and personal success is especially important within the context of neoliberalism in the United States. It is necessary for immigrants to partake in the rhetoric of the American Dream to work hard and succeed without any help from the government or ask for special treatment marks you as the ideal American citizen.

Additionally, multiculturalism functions in a similar manner, circumscribing the limits of the "acceptable" immigrant: if an immigrant chooses to display characteristics that mark them as Other to preserve their ethnic identity, the acceptance of this choice is a reflection of "multiculturalism" and the perceived tolerance of difference. As long as the immigrant does not ask for special treatment, then recognition of their race or ethnicity is simply cursory without any real political weight. As Patricia Hill Collins says

in her work *Black Sexual Politics*, as long as the difference of ethnic minorities and Others is reduced to “culture”, multiculturalism functions as the scaled back form of recognition given to ethnic minorities and immigrants. That is, as long as their difference does not serve as the platform upon which they demand social, political or economic change, their cultures and traditions are tolerated. When their demands for the recognition of difference serve as a means to achieve social, political and economic change, it is seen as a threat to White normativity and the dominant culture thereby dismantling the idea of tolerance apparent in multiculturalism.

As will be shown through the analysis of South Asian American literary and television characters, the two ideas – the freedom to make choices and idealized visions of assimilation and multiculturalism – complement each other in setting up South Asian immigrants as both the Other and ideal immigrant citizen. These characterizations of South Asian American women work towards creating two narratives within the public sphere of the dominant culture. The first narrative, the one that imagines the immigrant as Other, allows for a White audience to embrace the idea of multiculturalism, while reinforcing their dominance within the normative space of the nation. The second narrative, of the ideal immigrant or model minority, creates further stratification of racial minorities by reinforcing the idea of good versus bad immigrants and minorities. Those who display their ethnicity or race within the accepted hegemonic parameters are rewarded for that behavior, while those who do not are demonized.

These trajectories of “acceptability” as depicted in representations of immigrant identities are first explored in the short story collections of two South Asian American authors, Jhumpa Lahiri and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. Divakaruni and Lahiri are

perhaps two of the most well known South Asian American authors currently writing and publishing in the United States, and both have been very well received by audiences and critics. There are also many personal similarities between the two. Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies*, and Divakaruni's *Arranged Marriage* are both the first set of short story collections published by the writers in roughly the same time period; Lahiri's work was published in 1999, while Divakaruni's work was published in 1995. Both authors are of similar ethnic background, hailing from Bengali families and are now members of the Indian American immigrant community. Both authors have received high praise and awards for their literary work – the *Interpreter of Maladies* won the Pulitzer Prize in 2000, while *Arranged Marriage* was awarded an American Book Award by the Before Columbus Foundation and both books have received other awards and critical acclaim. Additionally, both writers have had a novel turned into a film – both incidentally directed or written and produced by famous South Asian women in the film industry (Mira Nair and Gurinder Chadha). It is with these personal traits in mind that this essay focuses on the work of these two female, South Asian authors, as these similarities in both Lahiri and Divakaruni's backgrounds establish the authors as the typical, or perhaps even the idealized, female South Asian immigrant subject in the United States. Their stories of immigration and their subsequent successes, create an additional narrative to the ones apparent in their literary works. Their lives are firmly reflected in the lives of their characters, in so much as they fall within the same normative structures of the dominant culture.

Lahiri's and Divakaruni's praise and recognition within the United States demonstrate that their work is read widely within American society, and as such may

have an impact on how non-South Asian American readers identify with and understand South Asian Americans as an immigrant community. Their work, and the representations they create on the page, provides material for discourse within the public sphere about the role of immigrants within the dominant culture, and how immigrants are imagined and represented. The images and representations they produce are incorporated into the hegemonic narratives in the public sphere. This is arguably the result of the ideas of multiculturalism from within the neoliberal school of thought. This results in representations that exist in the public sphere without the understanding of the nuances of the South Asian American immigrant community. Therefore, it can be argued that the audience of Lahiri and Divakaruni's work will presume a kind of authenticity in the experiences relayed through the characters of their short stories. Their characters, and to a certain extent, the authors themselves, will be read as ciphers of the South Asian immigrant woman identity. The stories that Lahiri and Divakaruni have crafted in the these two collections are representations of the narratives of assimilation that immigrants are expected to adopt, and also inform and reflect the views held by the dominant culture on immigrant identities.

While the representations of South Asian immigrant women currently on television are written by overwhelmingly white, male and middle class, television writers there is no presumption that the show writers are reflecting their own experiences – instead they are reflecting the dominant narrative that appears in the public sphere about the South Asian immigrant woman. Yet as we will see, both the “authentic” literary authors and “normative” white male writers produce strikingly similar immigrant tales and forms of representation. The section on fictional television programs will explore

how the representation of the raced female body, specifically South Asian immigrant women, in American fictional television media currently manifests. This analysis of South Asian female characters on television is conducted within the context and the understanding of the discourse surrounding raced female bodies in media representation. Through the lens of feminist discourses, a critique of the South Asian characters will reveal that the requisite markers of raced female bodies in visual media – the hyper aggressive and hyper sexualized woman, the kind and doting mother figure, and the tough, aggressive, independent female figure – often found in African American characters and Latina characters, do not manifest in the characters who are visibly South Asian women. This is important to note because it affirms the narrative of the model minority and good immigrant, and perhaps even to a certain extent affirms the narrative of assimilation. Because South Asian immigrants have been viewed as particularly successful in assimilation and normative success, they are rewarded by positive representations in the public sphere, whereas African American and Latina characters are represented through stereotype and negative imagery. Therefore, this deviance from caricatured, racialized stereotypes is significant - whether from an “authentic” sub-cultural or dominant culture perspective, South Asian immigrant women are being represented in the same ways. In comparison, narratives and representations of “Other” raced groups differ between representations that they themselves create, and the representations created by and appearing in the dominant culture.

Therefore, despite being raced bodies, the South Asian characters do not exhibit the same stereotypical otherness of non-White women. This analysis was surprising; the expectation, based upon previous scholarship in this area, was to see all non-white

women represented in similar ways, and these South Asian immigrant characters did not fit the expected stereotype. Why are these women represented differently in comparison to other women of color, especially in light of theories by feminist scholars, such as Patricia Hill Collins, that discuss the eroticized and exoticized otherness of women of color, and the stereotypes employed to describe them and maintain structures of racial subordination and racism?

To understand why and how these representations of South Asian American women on television differ from other women of color, the section on television will first discuss the theories and historical representations of women of color within three different racial categories: Latina, African-American and Asian American. These three racial identities were chosen because of their population size in the United States. According to the 2000 US Census Data, African-Americans and Hispanic/ Latinos are approximately 12.5 percent of the population each, followed by Asian Americans¹ at 3.6 percent. After the white population, these are the three largest racial identities in the United States. Additionally, they have been represented in some form or another on television; the theory and practice surrounding the images the mass media have created will inform my analysis of South Asian women on television. The specific stereotypes of hyper aggressiveness, hyper sexuality and on the other end of the spectrum, the doting, innocent mother figure that is often found with female characters of Latina, Black and Asian American ethnicities will serve as a framework within which comparisons to South Asian immigrant women characters will be made.

¹ Asian Americans in the census comprise of East, Southeast and South Asians. However, according to the data, most Asians in the US are of East and Southeast Asian descent, comprising of 2.7 percent of the total population. Asian Indians comprise 0.6 percent, while all other Asian races comprise 0.8 percent.

The South Asian immigrant women characters will be analyzed through case studies of four television shows regularly airing in primetime: *Greek*, *The Office*, *Scrubs*, and *ER*. Two of these shows are half hour comedies and the other two are hour-long dramas. Each of these shows has one female South Asian actor playing a character on the show, three of whom are South Asian, one of who is ambiguously raced. With the historical representations of women of color in mind, I will be analyzing these series' depictions of South Asian women for the specific divergences of these women of color from the more common historical tropes of woman of color representation.

These actors and their respective shows were chosen for two main reasons: firstly, the shows are regular primetime offerings, thus securing a large audience share, and secondly the characters are all main characters or major recurring characters on their shows. Therefore their characters are significant in both plot development and the other characters' development, meaning their roles have a legitimate function on the show, as opposed to being incidental or used for comedic or dramatic effect. These shows are also currently airing on television, or as in the case of *ER*, recently finished its series run on network television. There are other South Asian female actors found on television currently but for the purposes of this paper, only this small subsection will be analyzed due to a personal familiarity with the four shows mentioned in this paper, and because of the centrality of the characters on these shows.

Comparisons of the four characters will be further analyzed, to illustrate any commonalities, and what these might mean. The section following this will explain why neoliberal theories and policies surrounding immigration, personal responsibility and multiculturalism have resulted in these particular depictions of South Asian women. It is

the use of news media images and rhetoric of the “model minority” myth that creates an image and representation of South Asian women and men as the “good” kind of Other. Such perpetuations in the mass media result in skewed views of South Asians - even if they are largely positive – allowing for generalizations and stereotypes to be constructed about a group of people that are in no way homogenous.

This kind of stereotyping is detrimental not only to the South Asian community as a whole, but also in creating further stratifications between ethnic and racial minorities in the United States. By employing the model minority stereotype in regards to South Asians, members of the community that do not fit this particular narrative are essentially erased from the public eye; recognition for them is seemingly unimportant. Additionally, the model minority stereotype allows the dominant culture to make comparisons between minority groups, allowing for the demonization of racial groups that do not fulfill the criteria of model minority status.

Chapter 2:

Representations in the Public Sphere

The representations in both Lahiri and Divakaruni's work, as well as the representations of South Asian women in television media, and how those representations are received is instrumental to the discourse that occurs in the public sphere. The definition of the public sphere as set forth by Jurgen Habermas is, "the realm of our social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed," (73). Habermas however focuses on a very specific type of public sphere, a space between the private sphere of the home, and the public authority of the government or the state where public discourse between citizens can occur. Habermas' public sphere was located in the bourgeois coffee shops of late 19th Century and early 20th century in the West. The educated middle classes would gather in these spaces to discuss politics, culture and society in a space that was outside of the home and separate from the official view of the government.

However, as Nancy Fraser has pointed out, Habermas' focus on the bourgeois public sphere leaves much to be desired in the modern age (57-58). During that historical period, the exclusion of many social groups, especially women, did not allow for truly democratic discourse. The participants in this public discourse were primarily educated, middle class White men. As Fraser points out, the lack of diversity in the actual composition of the groups attending and participating in these public discourses necessarily meant that a true diversity of opinions could not exist. Therefore, Fraser argues that this fact invalidates Habermas' claim that public opinion can be formed in the

public sphere. If the discourse was not democratic, as Habermas claimed it was, then the public sphere merely replicated and reified the dominant interests and beliefs of the ruling classes.

However, reformulations of the vision of the public sphere by theorists such as Fraser, have allowed for flexibility and a retooling in our understanding of what the public sphere entails in our modern age. Negt and Kluge expanded Habermas' definition of the public sphere; their inclusion of the mass media allows greater inclusion for the proletariat, or those ordinarily excluded from Habermas' vision of a bourgeois public sphere. Negt and Kluge's reformulation of the public sphere harnesses the power of mass media and new media technologies (available at the time in the 1970s) in creating what Fraser called counterpublics – collections of citizens with similar interests that constitute the proletarian public sphere. These counterpublics formed by members of the proletariat are a means of recreating narratives that reflect their own social experiences.

The media then functions as a way to engage citizens of the nation with other citizens of the same nation, even if they may have never encountered them in their daily lives – the reader imagines a community of citizens and what it must look like to create this nation state. As Benedict Anderson says, “It is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion” (6). The idea or perception that we have of others, both similar to and different from ourselves, comes largely from the media, because rarely will we encounter every other person in the nation. Therefore, it seems that media is instrumental in reproducing a nation state in which the citizens understand and imagine each other's lives in common. Additionally,

the citizens imagine the state and the citizenry as homogenous; as Anderson says, we participate through print media in the fantasy of “unisonance,” that is, that “we” all speak the same language and in one or the same “voice.”

Therefore, contrary to the media idealism of Negt and Kluge, the media are in actuality and in effect an instrument of the dominant public sphere rather than a counterpublic. Furthermore, as the media has since expanded across different mediums, it has taken on new forms; social networking, twenty-four hour news cycles and reality television have created media that are expansive both locally and globally. This new form of mass media allows for a greater reach on a transnational level, but at the same time allows for the viewer or user to identify what is and is not a part of their citizenry and nation. That is, a viewer or media user in the United States may have access to the local news in China or India, but understands those nations to be “Other”, and as such does not imagine that the citizens of those nations are anything like citizens of the United States. In fact, it would seem that this expansive reach of the media does not necessarily bring transnational subjects together, but in fact reaffirms ideas of the nation and ideal citizenry in the viewer or user. Not only is media in its non-fiction form a phenomenon to be reckoned with, but also its fictional forms are just as important. Fictional media such as television shows and literature form a part of the public sphere. That is, they too inform citizens in the nation of how others in the nation might live.

Kavita Daiya, through a formulation of Negt and Kluge’s reimagining of the public sphere as proletarian, argues for the existence of the postcolonial public sphere. “This book appropriates Negt and Kluge’s theorization of publicity to describe the complex network of ‘postcolonial publics’ – hegemonic and alternative – that mark South

Asian cultural life; these postcolonial publics are now inherently diasporic and transnational given the reach of mass media,” (13). While Daiya’s work is focused on the postcolonial subject and discourse as related to the postcolonial nation state, I argue that the transnational and diasporic nature of the postcolonial public sphere, necessarily includes those postcolonial citizens and subjects who are now living as immigrants in the West, and for the purposes of this paper, specifically America. The counterpublic sphere that immigrants have aimed to create through their discourse of immigrant identities in media (whether literary, visual or in journalism) informs the discourses of immigration and immigrant identities in both the counterpublic and public spheres of the United States.

The images and representations of immigrant identities in immigrant counterpublics are assimilated into the dominant public sphere; therefore the production of minority discourse inevitably produces a hegemonic narrative in the public sphere. This further demonstrates the neoliberal cultural work of assimilation and multiculturalism. That is, immigrant narratives are made to be both different and assimilated in order to produce a “proper” immigrant subject and American citizen. Conversely, immigrants themselves may work in constructing an image of their immigrant community and identities that affirm commonly held beliefs or discourses that occur in the public sphere. We see this, for example, with Divakaruni’s work, and with Mindy Kaling’s portrayal of Kelly Kapoor on *The Office*. Both creators’ characters are written in ways that are recognizable to members of the dominant public sphere.

The existence of the dominant public sphere in which the hegemonic culture and narrative is reproduced necessarily excludes the discourse of the realities of immigrant

communities and immigrant identities. The creation of counterpublics by the South Asian immigrant community allow for discourse that is relevant within their social context. Through the use of new media and the production of fiction and non-fiction, the South Asian immigrant community creates a space within which they can discuss the issues or, in the case of fiction, reflect the realities of their lives. However, as the discourse that takes place occurs in public, others may access this counterpublic sphere.

In fact, the discourse in the dominant/normative public sphere depicting immigrant identities is sometimes appropriated from the discourse in the counterpublic sphere. Neoliberal ideas of multiculturalism and tolerating difference inform this appropriation. The blurring of boundaries between the public and counterpublic sphere occurs because the neoliberal ideas of financial responsibility, independence and consumerist rhetoric are tied to the image of the ideal citizen. Immigrant identities crafted through this lens necessarily fulfill the role of reifying the images of the “good” immigrant in the public sphere; these immigrant identities reinforce ideas like the model minority trope that influence people’s views about South Asian American immigrants.

Additionally, Dick Hebdige argues that dominant culture responds to threats to its own coherence and continuing dominance with two forms of incorporation simultaneously: the commodity form and the ideology form (90-99). While Hebdige’s analysis addressed the subculture of punks in the United Kingdom, his definition of incorporation through commodity and ideology also apply to the immigrant narrative within the space of dominant American culture. As Hebdige argues, the first form - commodity - turns difference into something to be embraced and purchased – that is markers of culture or racial identity can be reduced to material goods - and the second

form - ideology - demonstrates that “they” are not so different from “us” after all, that is to say that the image of South Asian immigrants as model minority citizens mark them not as Others but as the ideal American citizen-subject – an image the dominant culture can embrace willingly. Therefore in order for the hegemonic narrative of the citizen-subject to remain intact, representations of immigrants in their counterpublic spheres must be incorporated into the discourse in the public sphere.

Chapter 3:

Assimilation and Immigrant Politics in Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies*

Lahiri's collection of short stories encompasses different generations, and different continents. Out of the nine stories, only two have protagonists who are not immigrants to the United States, the rest all specifically represent US immigrant characters, whether or not the focus of the story is their immigrant background. Lahiri's work in this collection has garnered much critical acclaim for her beautiful prose and deft story telling. Certainly the characters are interesting, and three-dimensional, despite the brevity of their stories. However, much is revealed through Lahiri's imaginings of the lives of first and second-generation immigrants in America. Lahiri's stories showcase quite clearly the ideas of assimilation and multiculturalism. Markers of integration into the dominant American culture are scattered throughout her stories, and her immigrant characters regularly reinforce the image of the idealized immigrant subject-citizen.

In 'When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine', Lahiri creates a story of loss and innocence, tempered by the experience of the immigrant. The story is told from the point of view of Lilia, a ten-year-old girl living with her immigrant parents in Boston in 1971. Lilia's parents host Mr. Pirzada every night for dinner in their home. Mr. Pirzada is a student in the United States, his family left behind in East Pakistan (now Bangladesh), the site of the struggle for Bangladeshi independence from West Pakistan (now Pakistan). While the focus of the story is Mr. Pirzada's and Lilia's parents' concern over the war happening between India, East Pakistan and West Pakistan, several moments throughout the text

speaking directly to the isolation immigrants face, and the expectations of assimilation and the assault on immigrant identity.

Lahiri's first exploration of immigrant isolation occurs at the beginning of the story, explaining how Lilia's parents meet Mr. Pirzada:

The supermarket did not carry mustard oil, doctors did not make house calls, neighbors never dropped by without an invitation, and of these things, every so often, my parents complained. In search of compatriots, they used to trail their fingers, at the start of each new semester, through the columns of the university directory, circling surnames familiar to their part of the world. It was in this manner they discovered Mr. Pirzada, and phoned him, and invited him to our home. (24)

Lilia's parents, unaccustomed to the foreign nature of the society around them create a sense of community and familiarity through the means of reaching out to other immigrants from their own country in order to stave off the isolation of being an immigrant family. Lilia describes her parents as having found many Indian acquaintances this way.

We are further given a glimpse into the immigrant experience through Lilia's experiences at school. While at home her discussions revolve around Partition and the Indo-Pak war of the 70s, at school her focus is solely on the American Revolution. However, Lilia's interest has been piqued by the events occurring in her parents' native country through watching the nightly news, and she ventures into her school library

section on Asia during class. As Lilia explores a book about Pakistan, and reads more about its history, a classmate finds her, and explains that their teacher is looking for them:

Mrs. Kenyon emerged, the aroma of her perfume filling up the tiny aisle, and lifted the book by the tip of its spine as if it were a hair clinging to my sweater. She glanced at the cover, then at me. ‘Is this book a part of your report, Lilia?’ ‘No, Mrs. Kenyon.’ ‘Then I see no reason to consult it,’ she said, replacing it in the gap on the shelf. ‘Do you?’ (33)

Lilia’s experience here reflects the assimilationist rhetoric that surrounds immigrants and the construction of immigrant identities. Lilia is essentially denied an understanding of her history, her family’s ethnic history and of the current events that affect her and people she cares about. Her duty as a good American citizen is to identify with the American history taught to her in the classroom, the only history that should and can be accessible to her if she wants to be considered truly American. Any other interests mark her as Other, although as Lahiri points out in one swift sentence this is the dilemma of the immigrant, because, no matter what, she is still marked as the Other. “Several people told me they had never seen an Indian witch before,” (39). This one sentence, an otherwise throwaway line in a description of a very American pastime, trick or treating, again marks Lilia as the Other and provides a demonstration of mainstream acceptance of immigrants in the United States. The response to Lilia reflects the demands of assimilation placed onto immigrants subjects by the normative, dominant culture while also reinforcing the idea that no matter how assimilated an immigrant may become, there

is a limitation to how “American” they are allowed to be. Raced immigrants, despite their efforts to assimilate, will always be considered Other - they are not ever allowed to simply be or become “American”.

While “When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine”, focuses on the negotiation of an ethnic versus American identity for new immigrants, “A Temporary Matter” and “This Blessed House” tell stories where the immigrant identity is one that is simply woven into the fabric of the story. There are a few markers in each of these stories that identify the protagonists as Indian, and yet these stories also serve as means of understanding immigrant assimilation. “A Temporary Matter” reveals the decomposing of a relationship between a young married couple, Shoba and Shukumar. Driven apart by the loss of their infant son, the couple is briefly brought together again when their electricity is scheduled to go out a few nights in a row. Under the mask of candlelight and the allure of a freshly cooked meal, Shoba and Shukumar reconnect briefly, if only to ease Shoba’s announcement of her leaving Shukumar.

Both characters are described in ways that allow for them to be of any racial background. Their ethnicities are only incidental to the story – the only real markers of an Indian identity are the descriptions of food and spices at their dinners, and allusions to family and life in India. This would seem to fit with the idea and theme of the story – loss and grief, being universal feelings. However, it subtly represents an ideal of the immigrant narrative, immigrants so well assimilated into American / Western culture, that this story could be about anybody else and it would still have the same impact. And while their ethnic markers still set Shoba and Shukumar apart from being fully “American”, the characterization of their assimilation allows them to be, at the very least,

a generic “immigrant”. It should also be noted that Shoba and Shukumar’s markers of difference are reduced to consumable goods: spices, food, and travel to India, for example. By viewing their “difference” through a lens of consumerism, we can see the neoliberal ideology taking shape in the immigrant story.

The following description of Shukumar’s vision of having children reveals how Lahiri feels about the integration of these two characters into the American way of life:

As the cab sped down Beacon Street, he imagined a day when he and Shoba might need to buy a station wagon of their own, to cart their children back and forth from music lessons and dentist appointments. He imagined himself gripping the wheel, as Shoba turned around to hand the children juice boxes. (3)

The ordinariness of this dream, the very Americanized imagery of Shukumar’s hopes and dreams – dentist appointments, music lessons, juice boxes and station wagons are all ways to mark Shukumar and Shoba as immigrants comfortable with their assimilation into mainstream American society. His dream reinforces the idea that their ethnic difference is of no consequence. Whether it is spices or juice boxes that define their lives, racial and cultural difference amount to nothing, or are no barrier, as long as those differences does not demand or threaten to change the dominant order of things. Therefore, Shukumar’s vision of his and his wife’s future necessarily includes a consumerist rhetoric that is all too common to American visions of the “good life.” The purchase of a station wagon, the expenditure on music lessons and food items like juice boxes all signify a very specific type of American dream – a neoliberal one. The idea of a

consumerist and capitalist rhetoric influencing immigration and assimilation will be further explored in this paper, but it is important to note that these ideas are pervasive throughout Lahiri's text.

We see evidence of this as well within the short story "This Blessed House". Sanjeev like Shukumar is preoccupied with setting up his new home, while Twinkle's character, like Shoba, is a woman not bound by her husband's wants and needs. Both Shoba and Twinkle act as they choose to (reflecting back on Grewal's analysis: the immigrant woman is freed from oppression through the Western, neoliberal idea of choice) because as Indian American women, they have a plethora of choices. Twinkle and Sanjeev's story in "This Blessed House" revolves around their moving into a new home as newlyweds, and subsequently discovering Christian paraphernalia throughout their new house. Twinkle refuses to throw any of it away, while Sanjeev remains uncomfortable with keeping the items in his new house. Sanjeev is crafted as concerned with his and Twinkle's lifestyle. Throughout the piece Sanjeev works diligently to set up his new home so that he can "impress people" (140). The description of Twinkle as idle, and somewhat flighty, with Sanjeev as the reliable, mature partner does not conjure up stereotypical images of the traditional dynamic of a South Asian relationship. Twinkle is wont to do what she wants, when she wants it, without Sanjeev affecting her behavior. "For this reason it irritated him when Twinkle insisted on wearing high heels, as she had done the other night when they had dinner in Manhattan," (140). And while we are reminded of their ethnic identity through the story of how they met – arranged marriage is commonly associated with South Asians, even though historically the phenomenon occurs in all parts of the world – and the occasional flash of ethnic imagery, for the most

part, Twinkle and Sanjeev represent the idealized immigrant story: a young couple, purchasing a home after being newly married and having the means to do so because of the financial success of the male partner. Twinkle and Sanjeev, throughout the text, are clearly desirous of, and even embrace, the normative material markers and parameters of “American-ness” and successful assimilation.

Twinkle and Sanjeev’s characters and their relationship reflect what the reader is already aware of about immigrant identities through the public sphere. Twinkle and Sanjeev, while distinctly Other because of their exotic food, dress and cultural practices also fulfill the rhetoric associated with the model minority stereotype. Sanjeev is financially successful, with the ability to buy a house and support his wife, Twinkle’s, pursuit of a Master’s degree. This heteronormative, middle class lifestyle described in this short story is one that sits well with the American public, and one that is often demanded of immigrants. The expectations of assimilation are reflected in what the public sphere sees as the ideal citizen; therefore Sanjeev and Twinkle’s nuclear family adheres to these expectations exactly.

Additionally, Twinkle performs minority culture in the way dominant America expects her to. She may not cook or clean for her husband, but when her guests arrive Twinkle is wearing a *salwar-kameez*, flowers in her hair and elaborate jewelry. Her husband’s friends, even those who are South Asian, are in awe of her beauty. Lahiri seems to cast Twinkle as an exotic beauty, able to cast a spell over her audience. This imagery is reminiscent of Orientalist representations of South Asian women as exotic and mysterious. Furthermore, this attention to Twinkle’s attire again reduces Sanjeev and Twinkle’s difference or Otherness to material goods, reinforcing the idea of a

consumerist rhetoric – that is difference and tradition are objects that can be bought and sold, just as one can purchase their way to an “American life”.

Perhaps, the most telling thing about Lahiri’s stories in this collection are not what they say, but what they do not say. With the exception of two of the stories in the book, most stories focus on middle-class, Bengali or Indian American immigrants who have the means to support themselves and are well educated. When we are exposed to the two protagonists who do not fit this narrative, both are lower-class women living in India working as servants.

What does it mean then for representations in the literary public sphere to only reflect a certain kind of immigrant? That we do not experience through Lahiri’s work the lives of lower-income immigrants, or immigrants from different ethnic backgrounds allows for only a certain type of immigrant representation in the public sphere – the kind that is educated, and financially self-sufficient., essentially reflecting the idea of the “model citizen”. Additionally, Lahiri’s work fits wholly within the heteronormative framework of American society. The absence of the queer in this text is noticeable – all of the characters in the stories about immigrants in America are married and in heterosexual relationships. While one story, “Sexy”, does highlight an extramarital relationship, the affair still operates within the context of a heteronormative relationship. Lahiri’s work while produced as a minority discourse works to reinforce and reproduce the hegemonic narrative of American-ness and “good” citizenship that is palatable in the public sphere. The immigrants in Lahiri’s work remind readers of the idealized, assimilated immigrant citizen.

Chapter 4:

Rescuing the Brown Woman in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Arranged Marriage*

While Lahiri's work focuses on the immigrant construction of identity through themes of isolation and assimilation, Divakaruni focuses on the treatment of women in both India and the United States in her collection of short stories. Divakaruni's stories primarily revolve around the relationships between Indian men and women, focusing on themes such as abuse, adultery and indifference while highlighting the immigrant narrative. While Divakaruni's individual stories are interesting and well written, taken together as a collection, the work seems to provide damning evidence of the need for the brown woman to be rescued, in this case by Western modernity and ideals. The title of the collection itself is evocative of stereotyped representations of Indian relationships solely occurring through arranged marriages. Unlike Lahiri's work, there is no short story in the collection called "Arranged Marriage"; therefore, the title of this collection adds a layer of meaning (and a lens) from which to view this collection of stories.

In the story "Affair", we are introduced to Abha and Ashok, a young couple brought together by arranged marriage. Abha learns through her husband, that her best friend Meena is having an affair and as the story progresses, we learn that Abha is suspicious that Meena may be having the affair with her husband. Her suspicions are based on a multitude of behaviors she notices: Ashok and Meena are very flirtatious with each other; Ashok is indifferent to her and often makes fun of her; and Meena refuses to tell her about the affair. Although we later learn that Meena's affair is with a particularly nondescript man from her office, the suspicion that Abha has of the supposed tryst

between her best friend and her husband has her re-examining many aspects of her life, eventually giving her reason to leave her husband.

There are several instances throughout this short story that point to the trope of the “poor brown woman” that Grewal speaks of. During the first interaction we witness between Abha and Ashok, Ashok turn on MTV, which Abha appears to dislike. The text specifically implies that it is Abha’s “prudish Indian upbringing” (234), which creates her discomfort with the images she sees on television. This particular exchange evokes ideas of the sexually repressed Indian woman, not allowed to own her sexuality, or enjoy the sexuality of others. In another moment, when Abha is reflecting on an exchange with her friend Meena, she reveals that she thinks it is unnecessary to make an effort in her appearance even for her husband:

‘Why do I need to look good?’ ‘Really Abha!’ Meena had shaken her head like there was no hope for me. ‘All women need to look good. Don’t you want Ashok’s heartbeat to speed up when he looks at you?’ the thought of it made me laugh out loud. Really, sometimes Meena’s ideas were so adolescent. I remembered my mother, who’d spent most of her life in the simple red-bordered cotton saris most Bengali mothers wore, dabbing at her plump face with its palloo as she hurried from kitchen to nursery to dining room. I doubted that she’d ever made my father’s heartbeat speed up (though of course he loved her) – at least not in the last thirty years I’d known them. ‘You’re starting to sound like an American, Meena! Indian marriages aren’t based on such superficial things.’
(235-6)

We see this articulation of “Indianness” formulated in stereotypical ways – a belief that a marriage is not for love or lust, and Abha’s unwillingness to acknowledge her sexuality. We’re reminded of this instance again when Abha comes across an adult channel late at night, and watches with fascination, titillated by the images on the screen (242-3). As she watches the couple on the screen, she reflects on her own sex life with her husband, and realizes that her refusal to “do things differently, try something new” (244) may have been detrimental to her marriage.

It is only after Abha learns of Meena’s affair that she questions her relationship with her husband, reassessing the choices she has made in her life (and the choices made for her). Perhaps it as Grewal points out, it is only once Abha realizes she has more choices in her new life and the ability to choose for herself in America that she is able to grasp the independence that so eluded her as a woman in India. The story ends with Abha deciding to start anew for herself by leaving her husband, Ashok, despite what her family and the Indian community might say about her.

This theme of personal renewal in opposition to being tied down by repressive traditions is repeated in other stories in this collection. “Clothes,” a story of a young bride moving to the United States after her marriage only to be widowed after her husband is shot at the convenience store he owns, is filled with imagery of the repressed Indian woman, unable to act for herself or make independent choices. The following lines from the story are perhaps most reflective of how Divakaruni views the Indian woman, and wishes to represent her in the public sphere: “That’s when I know I cannot go back. I don’t know yet how I’ll manage, here in this new, dangerous land. I only know I must.

Because all over India, at this very moment, widows in white saris are bowing their veiled heads, serving tea to in-laws. Doves with cut off wings,” (33).

The imagery present here, bowing, veiled heads, serving and doves with cut off wings specifically mark the Indian woman as unable to be free in her home country. It is only once she chooses to stay in America, and opens herself up to the opportunities and choices found in the Western and modern society that she is able to redeem herself. This theme is also present in the story “The Disappearance”, when a young wife disappears from her home in the Bay Area, and her husband searches for her. However, we learn that the husband often subjected his wife to marital rape, and did not see that there was anything wrong with this. Upon discovering that his wife’s jewelry is gone, thereby alluding to the fact that she may have run away as opposed to being abducted, he simply asks his mother to find him a new Indian bride – one who is simple and uneducated so that he would be able to better control her.

Divakaruni heavily demonizes the Indian men in this collection through depictions of abuse as seen in “The Disappearance” or through heightened indifference to their wives as seen in “Affair”. The one Indian man who does seem to respect and love his wife is the one who dies in “Clothes”. It seems then that the visions of Indian men, as the oppressors of Indian women are what we are ultimately left with after reading Divakaruni’s collection of short stories. Leaving the impression upon the reader that Indian women can only be independent and free if they are not married to Indian men, and are able to lead their own lives in America, as they would never be given this possibility in India.

Chapter 5:

Assimilation and Emancipation: Representations of Immigrant Women

When analyzing Lahiri and Divakaruni's work together, a certain pattern emerges in the representations of immigrant women. It seems that the images that inform the way immigrants are viewed in the public sphere are reliant upon two very specific tropes – one is that the South Asian woman is repressed and oppressed, the other is that a South Asian immigrant woman's assimilation into mainstream American society no longer demands her to be subservient to her husband, her family or her parents. Additionally, we are only given an understanding through these texts of one particular type of immigrant: the educated, middle class immigrant with a stable job. While Divakaruni's text does a better job of highlighting the racial tensions and economic difficulties that immigrants face, her immigrant characters are still overwhelmingly middle class and educated, and heterosexual, functioning in a heteronormative manner that appears to reflect “modern,” Western heterosexual norms.

Both texts deal with the image of the South Asian immigrant as Other, but they do function slightly differently in each text – in Lahiri's work, the immigrant is marked in specific ways through their food, or dress, or other physical cultural markers and an association with the politics of the home state. However Divakaruni's text marks the immigrants as Other through cultural and traditional practices, thoughts and actions. While Lahiri's immigrants appear informed and educated, Divakaruni's characters seem bound by traditional mores (despite similar class backgrounds to Lahiri's characters).

The images that are presented in this public sphere either reinforce or reconstruct stereotypes of South Asian immigrant women. Divakaruni's text allows for the American audience reading this book to see South Asian women as oppressed and subjugated to traditional laws, while Lahiri's work informs the myth of a model minority – the idea that immigrants are educated, hard working and middle class means they will not rely on assistance from the government or be a burden to American society. Instead of creating stories that cast a wide look at the immigrant narratives that exist in the United States, both Lahiri and Divakaruni have created characters and narratives that are palatable to the American audience and reduce South Asian immigrant women and their communities to easily incorporated stereotypes.

Chapter 6:

Beyond Literature

The image of the educated, financially stable and heteronormative immigrant woman is one that transcends works of literature. These ideas of South Asian American women are also prevalent on television. Through the lens of feminist media analysis, the next section explores how women of color have been represented on television and in visual media historically. How those prevalent stereotypes affect South Asian women will be explored through an analysis of four different characters on four different fictional television shows. The sections following will demonstrate that despite the passage of time between the publishing of Lahiri's and Divakaruni's work and the appearance of South Asian American characters on mainstream, major network television, ideas of assimilation, Otherness and the "model minority" trope are pervasive throughout popular television programs as well as popular literature.

Chapter 7:

Representations of Women of Color in Mainstream Television Media

Feminist theorists have tackled various aspects of the media since the early 1960s (Brunsdon & Spigel 5-6), and in particular many have considered the effects on women of the representation of women on television. Laura Mulvey's influential work *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, written in 1975, is seen as the flashpoint for feminist media criticism's discussions of the nature of the male gaze, and whether women can ever be subjects and not just objects of desire within the realm of visual representation. While Mulvey's work references film, similar discussions have been made of television and the representations of female bodies and femininity on television.

Much has also been written specifically on raced female bodies, and how their representation in popular media has propagated racist and sexist stereotypes about non-white women. Within this section, the representation of women of color will be discussed in regards to representation of African American, Latina and Asian American² women in the mainstream media that is targeted towards a primarily white viewership.

Stereotypical representations of African American women have traditionally fit within three categories: the mammy, the jezebel and the sapphire (Springer 253). Each of these characters supposedly represents a certain type of African American woman; the

² For the purposes of this paper, I will classify Asian Americans as those whose ethnicity and race are of Korean, Japanese, Vietnamese, Filipino and Chinese descent. While other Asian races are considered to be a part of this demographic, for example people of Thai and Indonesian descent, because of the historical background of the five races mentioned above within the context of the United States, they will encompass the term Asian American. However, this by no means classifies them into a singular culture or social structure.

mammy is the nurturing mother figure, who is faithful to her children and those of her white master. She is often asexual, that is the mammy is not seen as a sexual being, or she has suppressed her natural sexuality to serve as a nurturer and/or mother to the white protagonist.

The second stereotype is the jezebel - oversexed and highly exoticized and eroticized, she is a promiscuous black woman with “loose morals”. As described by Hill Collins, the image of the jezebel rendered black women “impossible to rape” (“Politics” 64) because their sexuality was circumscribed as wild and wanton.

Finally the third stereotype is the sapphire: the loud, aggressive and fierce woman who stands up to black and white men. Often depicted as the selfish, and self-serving welfare queens who gobble up resources for their multitude of children, all produced from sexual relationships with different men. Representations of black women outside of these three standard stereotypes have been and continue to be few and far between on mainstream television.

However, Donald Bogle points out that when black characters were written for black TV shows targeted towards black viewership, black women were less stereotyped and had more fleshed out backgrounds and better character development (430-5). Therefore Bogle’s research suggests that when people of color are involved in the production of their own representations, those representations tend to be less racist and stereotypical.

These three stereotypes of Black women seem to align almost identically to the three stereotypes in which Asian American characters are typically represented. The dragon lady, who is aggressive and evil, with the hint of power and independence. The

second stereotype is of the geisha, the sexually available woman easily taken advantaged of by white men and finally the good Asian woman, usually virginal, subservient and more often than not characterized as a dutiful wife or mother (Alquizola & Hirabayashi 155-68).

The dragon lady corresponds to the sapphire, while the geisha corresponds to the jezebel and finally, the mammy corresponds to the good wife or mother. Hill Collins, in her recent texts *From Black Power to Hip Hop* and *Black Sexual Politics*, details the current fascination of the mainstream media with “bitches and hoes”, aggressive and/or hyper sexualized Black women and women of color. This idea of aggressive and sexualized raced women is not only limited to black women, Celine Parrenas Shimizu in *The Hypersexuality of Race*, clearly details the excessive sexuality of Asian American females as depicted routinely in the mass media as well. She offers the example of the character Ling Woo on the television show *Ally McBeal* who was cast as an aggressive no-nonsense dragon lady who was so overtly sexual that “her articulation of the word “sex” causes havoc in the world – rendering with terrible certainty that the truth of the Asian woman lies in her uncontrollable sexuality,” (65). Not only do these raced female bodies fit within the sexual, femme fatale stereotype, they are seen as the foil or antithesis to the white woman, who embodies the "true sense" of femininity and object of male desire. As Parrenas Shimizu describes it, race is always seen as sex. So it is only fitting that when a raced female body is shown, the immediate representation that is presented or inferred has to do with her sexuality.

This too is true with depictions of Latina characters. While there are no three stereotypical roles to serve as parallels to the stereotypical black and Asian women, the

dichotomy of the virgin and whore fits neatly within these three typical roles. Latinas, as Flores and Holling state, fall into one of two categories: the virgin is the sweet innocent, more often than not motherly and nurturing role while the whore is the highly sexualized, sometimes loud and aggressive woman (339-354). The virgin fits neatly within the context of the asexual mammy and good Asian wife role, while the whore fits well within the context of the jezebel and sapphire / dragon lady and geisha. It is clear with this depiction of Latina characters that Parrenas Shimizu's assessment of race being equated to sex is how raced female bodies are depicted in the media.

Raced female bodies then, always stand in for some normative ideal of sex or sexuality, whether positively or negatively. Reducing the individual women characters to these stereotypes offers a limited perspective of women from different racial backgrounds, and perpetuates the myth that while White people are allowed to be individuals, people of color must always represent their race through stereotype, and stereotype alone. The use of stereotype necessarily casts people of color as the antithesis to White normativity and propriety – you can either be an individual or a stereotype. And while White normativity allows for White stereotypes (generally along class lines), it does not allow for raced characters, especially raced female characters, to display individualized characteristics or traits.

Chapter 8:

The Implications for South Asian Women on Television

These raced and gendered stereotypes of women of color appear to be homogenous across the board. Representations of these specifically raced female characters in the media create implications for how other non-white women are marked as “other”. It follows then that depictions of South Asian women in fictional television media should conform to these stereotypes, and be written as aggressive, hyper sexualized and eroticized or as desexualized and passively “feminine” or “nurturing.” However, this does not appear to be the case for the South Asian characters appearing on television. Stereotypical representations of South Asian women fall into a different category, they do not seem to be marked by sex or sexuality nor are their bodies equated as such. In many ways, their characters are treated in the same respect as white characters; they are three-dimensional individuals with interesting family histories and salient plot lines. However, recurring imagery that conjures ideas of a “model minority” and stereotypical depictions of South Asian ethnicity are frequently employed by the shows writers in crafting these characters. In creating narratives that reinforce ideas of “Otherness”, the writers of these shows reinforce the dominant narrative of racial hegemony, while creating further stratifications in race relations between racial minorities. This stratification serves as a tool in rewarding “good” minorities that assimilate into White normativity, while demonizing other racial minorities that have not achieved assimilation, or refuse to.

In the next section, four case studies of different television shows are presented. Each of these shows has a South Asian actor in a main or major recurring role. An analysis of this character within the context of the show and a comparison to the theory of media representation for raced female bodies will be conducted to determine whether or not their depictions fit these standard stereotypes. However, as will be further explained in the case studies, some of these characters are not necessarily marked as South Asian characters, and that too, will be a factor in the analysis.

Case Study: *Greek*

Greek is a primetime drama on the ABC Family network. The main premise of the show is to follow a sorority sister and her friends in the sororities and fraternities at a large university in a fictional Ohio town. The cast is a large ensemble of at least twenty actors, of whom nine are the main players with the most developed characters and plot lines. It is one of these characters, the sorority sister Rebecca Logan, that I will be focusing on. A South Asian American actor, Dilshad Vadsaria, who was born in Pakistan and later immigrated to the United States, portrays the character Rebecca.

Rebecca Logan, at the beginning of the series a freshman at Cyprus-Rhodes University and the daughter of a US Senator, is seen by the sororities on campus as a must-have pledge. Her father's position and reputation will bring prestige to whatever sorority she belongs to, and as such the sorority sisters at Zeta Beta Zeta (ZBZ) are insistent on pursuing her as a member ("Pilot"). However we learn that because of her father's political status and class privilege she is haughty, pretentious and believes she is

entitled to privileges that are reserved for the older sorority sisters. Additionally, in the pilot episode she has sexual intercourse with the main protagonist's boyfriend, further signifying her as the "villain" on the show.

From the pilot episode, we might draw a conclusion that it is no coincidence that the "villain" of the show is a woman of color, who uses her sexuality to get what she wants to wreak havoc while playing foil to the white, blonde protagonist. However, as the series develops, we learn that she often acts out in a rebellious way because she is expected to behave a certain way due to her father's position and visibility. She resents having to do this, feeling that she is often not recognized for being her own person but always as the "Senator's daughter" ("Depth Perception"). This episode allowed the audience to move from their position of vilifying the character to sympathizing with her. At the end of the season, we learn that Rebecca is in a relationship with the main protagonist's former boyfriend, that protagonist is also her mentor within the ZBZ sorority. This turn of events again recasts Rebecca as the villain, as she is seen as betraying the code of "sisterhood" within the sorority by dating the former partner of her sorority sister, but the portrayal of her relationship is a sympathetic one, with the writers implying that we understand her as a complex character. In the second season, she reconciles with the show's main protagonist, and attempts to make amends for her past indiscretions.

There are instances within the show that mark Rebecca as aggressive and highly sexualized, such as having sexual intercourse with a character who has a girlfriend ("Pilot"). However as later episodes reveal, this is because of her background and her family life as mentioned above. Additionally, the other main female characters are all

seen as sexual, and boy crazy. Within the context of the show and its setting within the college campus and more specifically within “Greek Life”, it seems appropriate for her character to be depicted as such. Therefore Rebecca’s highly sexualized, aggressive behavior is written within the context of the sexually charged atmosphere of college and “Greek Life”. This reflects what we see later in the season when another white, male character inherits a large trust fund; he too acts out by disrespecting others and having sexual intercourse with someone other than his girlfriend (“Big Littles and Jumbo Shrimp”). We can therefore infer that it is not because of the actor’s raced body that Rebecca behaves in this way, but that given the character’s privileged class background it explains this “bad” behavior.

Secondly, a striking thing about the character is her name, Rebecca Logan; it does not in any way specifically mark the character as raced. In addition to her non-raced name, the character’s father, the Senator, appears to be white (“47 hours and 11 minutes”). No explanation is given for why she as a non-white woman, has a white father. We are not introduced to her mother, so the audience is unable to determine whether or not she is mixed race. It is with this lack of explanation surrounding the character’s race that we can deduce that her race is immaterial to her character’s development. This is further cemented by the fact that three other raced characters on the show, two are African American and one is Asian American, all fall within this same non-recognized racial category. Their characters’ names are again non-raced, and the matter of race is never addressed on the show. Perhaps this is intentional on the writers’ part – the idea of a postracial, multicultural America is a pervasive and appealing one –

discussions of race and race relations in the United States are fraught, and introducing them into a show like *Greek* would change its dynamic greatly.

The character of Rebecca, rather than falling into either of the two standard traditional stereotypes - the eroticized raced woman who is hyper sexualized and aggressive or the desexualized matriarch/mammy - does not appear to be raced at all. Unlike the theory that women of color fit these standard tropes, the actor's race is not a factor in the character's background or development. This approach is what Hill Collins' refers to as color-blind racism, where race is not recognized or seen, often resulting in claims like "I don't see race". This "progressive" view towards race erases racial identity completely, ignoring the various issues that affect people of color at both a personal and institutional level.

Case Study: *Scrubs*

Scrubs is a half hour comedy show that airs during primetime on the NBC network. The show follows the lives of a group of doctors at a hospital in an undisclosed city. The show has followed its main players through the progression of their medical careers. The main cast is a group of seven actors, with some major recurring players. In season eight, a new group of interns was introduced on the show. These interns were also the main players in an online series in addition to the main broadcast show; the webisodes are called *Scrubs: Interns*. One of the interns, Sonia (Sunny) Dey, is played by the actor Sonal Shah who is a second generation South Asian American of Indian descent.

Sunny is first introduced to us in the television episode “My Absence” as one of the new interns on rotation at the hospital. Sunny does not appear in every episode after that, but has to date appeared in seven of the sixteen episodes aired so far this season. Other than learning that her father nicknamed her Sunny because she was very upbeat (“Their Story II”) and that she is naturally a very cheerful and upbeat person, there is not that much about the character’s background shown or referenced.

Sunny’s role on the show is highly caricatured – she is often the spontaneous comic relief in a dramatic situation and the other characters respond to her in a way the signifies her as quirky and odd; however, within the context of the show this is in line with the way the other interns and main actors are presented too. The comedic style of the television show is over the top and exaggerated and as such the characters veer between serious dramatic players and ridiculous comics. It does not appear that her race or the presentation of her visually raced body has made her in any specific way an outlandish character; similar treatment is given to all characters and actors regardless of their race. In fact, other than visually being a woman of color, initially her name and her various interactions with the characters do not mark her as such. It is not until the episode entitled “My Cuz” that Dr Kelso, one of the main players, refers to her as a “foreigner”, thus acknowledging her non-white race.

However, in the online webisodes, in which Sunny is actually the “director” of these home videos, her race and her identity as an Indian woman are clearly acknowledged (webisodes: “Our Meeting with JD”, and “Our Meeting with Braintrust”). There are several references to her being Indian in the webisodes and that are scattered throughout the ten short clips. Within the context of the show *Scrubs*, this does seem

fitting – race is something that is acknowledged and somewhat addressed in a comedic fashion. For example, the main surgeon on the show, Turk, is African American and is called “the black doctor” by another main player, The Janitor (“My Cuz” but recurring theme throughout the series). The obvious indication of Turk’s race by The Janitor who is known for his weird quirks and inappropriate comments marks this labeling of Turk as comically inappropriate.

Sunny’s character, with her upbeat and “sunny” outlook, is actually in direct conflict with the theory that women of color are portrayed in fictional media as hyper aggressive, hyper sexualized and exoticized. Nor is Sunny portrayed as desexualized, or sexually innocent and naïve. In her first appearance (“My Absence”), she makes a sexual suggestion to a fellow male intern, in another episode she makes a comedic reference to the number of abortions she’s had (“Their Story”) Like the other interns, Sunny is represented as a fresh-faced, inexperienced intern. Unlike the other interns, however, we have not seen her engage in obvious or visually sexual behavior (“Their Story II”; “My Full Moon”; “My Cuz”). While she is not portrayed as aggressive or sexual, she is not portrayed as desexualized or without an obvious sexual identity, which does not fit the theory of media representations of women of color.

Her eager to please character, the lack of aggressive sexuality and lack of mammy-like behaviors mark her in many ways as a model “raced female body”. Because she does not display aggressiveness or hyper sexuality, or come across as the maternal figure she is seen as an acceptable form of the raced female body – she does not seduce or beguile the white male with her exotic or erotic ways, she does not try to emasculate him with her aggressiveness, nor does she provide a nurturing or motherly presence. This

may be why her race is never addressed in the television episodes, in comparison to the character Carla, who is Latina and in many respects fits the stereotype of the aggressive, loud and in-your-face Latina woman who talks a lot. Drawing a comparison between these two women, we see that Sunny, the South Asian woman is noticeably different in the representation of, or lack of, her race whereas Carla is clearly marked as the Latina with a “fiery temper”.

The comparisons we can draw between these two raced female bodies on the same show, speak volumes about how South Asian American women are viewed as different to other women of color, that is they seem more “normal” or their behavior and demeanor is more “acceptable” for a White audience. It is significant that Sunny’s character, a visibly South Asian woman, is not portrayed using the same stereotypes that have historically been used when women of color appeared on screen. This automatically sets apart South Asians in the viewers mind, and allows the viewer to identify South Asian characters as accepting or assimilating into normative behaviors. It then perpetuates the idea that South Asians are the “good kind” of Other, and allows for further stratification across racial lines.

However, it must be noted that while Carla has appeared in most, if not all *Scrubs* episodes (she is a main cast member), Sunny’s character has only appeared in seven episodes, and in brief internet clips³ that comprise the webisodes. Should Sunny join the regular cast, and given more screen time her character may change. However, given her

³ While Sunny’s race is discussed in the webisodes, this content is not broadcast on television with the rest of the episodes of *Scrubs*; audiences need to visit the *Scrubs* website to view them. This requires greater engagement on the viewers’ part to take steps to view this extra content and therefore does not necessarily reflect how an audience may view the character.

initial introduction as the bubbly, smiling intern it seems unlikely that she will evolve into a loud, smart talking woman, like Carla.

Case Study: *The Office*

The Office is a half hour comedy show that airs during primetime on the NBC network. The show, a remake of a British television series, is shot in a documentary style, focusing on the work lives of employees in the regional branch of a paper company, Dunder Mifflin, that is based in Scranton, PA. The cast of the show is made up of five main players, with an additional ensemble cast, with many of the cast actually writers and producers on the show. The character that I will be focused on for this section is Kelly Kapoor played by Mindy Kaling, a second generation South Asian American of Indian descent. Kaling is also a writer and producer on the show, so we can infer that she has a substantial amount of input into her character's development and plot lines.

Kelly Kapoor is a member of the ensemble cast outside of the five main players in *The Office*. She is a customer service representative at the fictional paper company Dunder Mifflin, and has been a member of the ensemble cast since the first season, and appears in almost every episode aired to date (there are a few exceptions). Kelly's character is identified as an Indian American woman at the very beginning of the first season ("Diversity Day"). In this episode, one of the main players, the branch manager Michael Scott, makes several racist remarks and jokes, thinking that they are funny. As a result, corporate headquarters sends someone to do diversity training at the branch. Uncomfortable situations ensue, which leads Michael to speak to Kelly in a highly

caricatured “Indian” voice accompanied by stereotyped behavior that leads Kelly to slap him for offending her and her culture.

However, as the series developed, Kelly’s character seems less serious about her culture and background, and in some instances not knowing facts or details about religious holidays or festivals (“Diwali”). This appears to be a recurring theme with her character, who is written as bubbly, chatty, slightly flighty young woman who is obsessed with celebrity culture, clothing and boys. She is particularly interested in dating the office temp, Ryan, and in the episode “Carpet Days” cajoles her co-worker Jim to set her up with Ryan. When her relationship with the office temp Ryan ends, she dates another co-worker Daryl who works in the delivery warehouse for the branch.

Kelly’s character is multifaceted, and in many ways both does and does not display her race. In the “Diwali” episode, Kelly is seen in traditional Indian wear, celebrating the festival of Diwali with the Indian community and her family and friends. However, as mentioned earlier, while she may celebrate the festivals and holidays, she does not know the meaning behind them. Her younger sisters in this episode do speak Hindi, so we might perhaps infer that she may too, but we have not seen evidence of this. Her parents are also revealed to have had an arranged marriage, only meeting once before their wedding. They are also insistent on seeing Kelly with a suitable date (that is, a “proper” Indian boy), and question her boyfriend at the time, Ryan, about his plans for his and Kelly’s future. All of these instances signify Kelly as a South Asian woman. Furthermore, Michael, the office manager always points out Kelly’s ethnic identity, usually by saying something offensive that we, the audience, will find humorous because of his idiocy but recognize his words as offensive.

However, Kelly also seems in many ways the typical “American girl”, obsessed with boys, fashion and celebrities. Perhaps the rendering of this character by the writers, and more particularly Mindy Kaling herself, is a reflection of Indian American youth and second-generation immigrants. They see themselves as a bridge between two worlds, one of tradition and ethnic heritage, and the other of their new home and American culture. Despite Kelly’s somewhat flighty nature, she is seen as good at her job when the show actually depicts her working (“Product Recall”). However, it seems surprising that given the propensity for the media to cast South Asian Americans as doctors, lawyers or accountants, that Kelly is none of these (Dunder Mifflin do have accountants in their branch office). She is the customer service representative of the branch, a job not typically seen as a profession that South Asian Americans will enter. However, there are references to this new field of work for Indians, living on the sub-continent, who work at call centers (“Dunder Mifflin Infinity”), when Ryan, Kelly’s former boyfriend, tries to use his new position at corporate headquarters to have Kelly’s job outsourced to India when she dupes him into thinking she is pregnant. This is seen as comic, because currently their customer representative is Indian, albeit one that is American too. This irony is an acknowledgement to the audience of current affairs; many American corporate firms in order to cut costs have outsourced their customer representative units to India.

Kelly’s character, over the course of the five seasons that have aired to date, is complex and interesting. As a character she is written well, and when analyzing her within the context of the theory of women of color and their media representation, she seems to both fit and not fit. She is presented as a sexual character, but instead of being intimidated by Kelly’s sexuality, we the audience are supposed to find it comic. We

should laugh at the ridiculous lengths that Kelly will go to get men to notice her, and to get her own way when it comes to romantic relationships. Kelly is not seen as particularly aggressive, but her tendency to talk a lot about nothing is presented as over-bearing at times. When analyzing Kelly within the context of the desexualized woman of color, we see that she does not fit the description for this trope either. She is not seen as mothering, or nurturing and although at times she may appear girlish or immature – she never displays sexual naïveté or a lack of sexual desire.

The other women in the branch, all of whom are white, are also presented in sexualized ways as well but through a comedic lens. We are supposed to find these characters’ romantic and sexual exploits ridiculous - with the exception of the main couple Jim and Pam – and laugh at the various uncomfortable situations that they find themselves in. In this respect, Kelly is treated no differently to the other white women on the show. All of their relationships are written in an exaggerated fashion to garner laughs from the audience.

Case Study: *ER*

ER was an hour long, primetime television drama on the NBC network, recurring weekly. It finished its fifteen-season run in April of 2009. The show revolved around the lives of the medical staff of a hospital in Chicago, most of who were primarily based in the Emergency Room. The show was written so that doctors would have to deal with various medical cases on a weekly basis while the show also explored their personal lives and their interwork relationships. The cast was an ensemble of ten to twelve main

players, with major recurring characters as well. From season ten onwards, the British South Asian actor, Parminder Nagra, played Dr Neela Rasgotra. Nagra is a second generation British South Asian, of Indian descent. Nagra played Neela until the series end.

Dr Neela Rasgotra is a main player in the ensemble cast and her character arrived on the show initially as a medical student finishing up her education in the United States. Neela later stayed on as a doctor once she graduated from medical school. Our initial impressions of Dr Neela Rasgotra are formed in the episode “Now What?”. She seems timid, and hesitant to engage people. For the most part, she goes unnoticed by the staff in the ER until a fellow doctor shows her around.

As the series develops, we see that Neela’s character fits within the American cultural representations and understandings of traditional South Asian family structure. When she decides not to pursue her medical internship with the University of Michigan, her parents are incredibly disappointed in her, especially as she ends up working in a grocery store as a cashier temporarily. Eventually she returns to her medical career, in part because she does not want to disappoint her family (“Drive” and “Damaged”). Additionally, when we are introduced to her cousin Jaspreet (“Status Quo”), it is because she has come to visit Neela in order to run away from an arranged marriage. As the series progresses, we see that Neela is not very self assured or comfortable with the decisions that she makes. She seems to also constantly need to be rescued by other staff members for her mistakes and struggles with hard decisions, especially regarding her romantic relationships (“I Don’t”).

Within the context of the show, as *ER* supposedly reflects the “real” lives of emergency room medical staff, there are a range of races on the show but there are still some stereotypical portrayals of raced characters. This is especially true with the two female Asian characters on the show – Neela and Chen (who is East Asian). Both female characters have traditional families and conservative parents who do not approve of the choices they make with their professional and personal lives, while they struggle with the balance of pleasing their parents and pleasing themselves. Admittedly, this struggle that some second-generation Asian immigrants experience is a reality; others assimilate and integrate into their new roles very well. It can be difficult for writers to portray these struggles delicately, and certainly on *ER* there seems to have been some thought behind these portrayals, especially considering Neela’s relationships with both black and white male co-workers, and Chen’s relationship with a black co-worker.

While Neela is not really presented as aggressive in the series (on the contrary, she appears to be quite reticent about her abilities as a doctor and does appear in many cases to be fairly insecure), her sexuality is fairly well represented on the show. Over the course of the five seasons she has appeared in, she has had four main love interests, Dr Michael Gallant, a black man, Dr Ray Barnett, Dr Tony Gates and Dr Simon Brenner all of whom are white. She has not had a South Asian love interest. As mentioned above, her romantic relationships have caused problems for her suitors in the past, resulting in Ray and Tony arguing over her while drunk. However, this is attributed to Neela’s inability to make decisions about her life, rather than any wanton sexuality (“I Don’t”). Even when she is seen as “the other woman” in Tony’s life, it is due to her lack of knowledge about his living situation (“Scoop and Run”).

On the whole, Neela's character has both positive and negative elements about her. While she has not been depicted as an aggressive, highly sexual character as the theory might imply, she has had her sexuality addressed and is not seen as asexual, as represented in the mammy or mothering stereotype. In some instances she appears to be fairly adept as a doctor, while in others she's seen as ineffectual and doubting herself. Her character is complex, but at the same time relies on stereotypical images of South Asian families and daughters.

Chapter 9:

How Television Media Represents South Asian American Women

Analyzing the characters Rebecca, Sunny, Kelly and Neela together will provide a greater understanding of how fictional South Asian women are presented in the mainstream media. Through a group analysis, potential stereotypes can be identified as well as any other recurring themes across all characters.

Initially it is important to note that only three of these characters are actually marked as South Asian, more specifically Indian, within the context of their television shows. Neela, Sunny and Kelly are all recognized as Indian American women, and Neela and Kelly particularly have their ethnic background specifically written into their storylines. It is difficult to make a similar assessment with Sunny, as her character has not been on the show for very long, whereas both Neela and Kelly have appeared on their respective shows and on television for five seasons or more. Rebecca is the only character to not have her race identified or marked in any way. In fact, the actor's appearance as a South Asian woman has been ignored completely.

Rebecca is a special case, because the show does not remark upon her race, despite her raced body being so visible and thus it is hard to read how she represents South Asian women. She cannot actually be considered a representation of South Asian women because her character is not labeled as such and cannot be used as a comparison to the other characters within the context of comparing their South Asian identities. However, as mentioned above, the lack of attention drawn to her race speaks to Hill Collins' descriptions of "new racism". The fact that the writers of *Greek* have given little

attention to Rebecca's race, or even addressed that she could be adopted, or mixed-race, are tied into the ideas of racial "color-blindness" and postracial America. While these ideas are on the surface seemingly positive, they are instead sinister in nature. By denying recognition of race and racial identities, Americans can choose to ignore the continued structural inequalities that minorities still face today. In essence, this is a "new racism" because it shrouds the "old racism" under a postracial, multicultural banner.

The genres in which these characters appear must also be taken into account. Kelly and Sunny are both present in half hour comedies, whereas Neela and Rebecca are in hour-long dramas. Within the context of their respective shows, while Sunny and Kelly are portrayed as ridiculous characters, this is also true of their surrounding ensemble cast and of the main players in both these series. Certainly Kelly, who has the more developed back-story of the two, is presented in the same light as her co-workers on the show. Sunny, when compared to the other new characters introduced this season on *Scrubs* is also written in a similar vein to that of her co-stars. While Kelly's relationships have served as launch points for various jokes, Sunny has only made a few jokes implying her sexuality when she suggests a fellow intern can drink shots of alcohol off of her backside, and jokingly refers to having had many abortions ("My Absence" and "Their Story II").

Both Kelly and Sunny have a common trait, in that other than being identified as South Asian American, their behavior does not set them apart from their white and black American counterparts. Sunny is a regular medical intern who has just as hard a time adjusting to the working life in the hospital as her fellow interns, while Kelly is obsessed with boys, fashion and celebrity gossip. Both these characters, with their ability to blend well within the cast, represent the idea of a "model minority." Because they do not draw

“unwarranted” attention to their race, and simply act “normal” (which can be read as white) Americans, they create the idea that South Asians have assimilated into American culture well and do not cause problems for the majority of white Americans. They may seem “foreign”, but really they are just like us! This line of thought is not only destructive to South Asians, who may face racism both at an institutional and personal level, but also to other racial minorities creating divides between “good” minorities and “bad” minorities (Iyer).

The same could be said of Neela’s representation in comparison with Sunny. Both are cast as doctors in hospitals where the work is taxing and stressful. Because of the model minority myth that currently exists in the mainstream media (Richwine), the appearance of South Asian characters in these shows is not out of the ordinary. Instead of casting either actor as nurse, or a hospital administrator, or a gift shop sales clerk, they are cast in the expected position of doctor, because of the myth that surrounds the educational attainment the community supposedly has.

Other stereotypes and myths surrounding the community also permeate both Neela and Kelly’s characters, more specifically related to their families and their parents. Both Neela and Kelly have two parents in a heterosexual marriage who are still together after thirty plus years of marriage. With Kelly’s family we know that her parents had an arranged marriage, with Neela this fact is never discussed but given that her cousin Jaspreet came to stay with her to escape her own arranged marriage, we can infer that Neela’s family and her parents are similarly traditional. With these South Asian characters we do not see parents who are divorced, or parents in a same sex marriage. We are shown the same family stereotype in both instances.

While the characters do not fit the stereotypes that are assigned to Latina, Black and Asian women, they do conjure their own stereotype – that of the model minority. All of these characters while they are identified as South Asian, are second generation (Neela is second generation British, but the idea holds true for her too, as assimilation into a majority white society for her would probably reflect the experiences of her American counterparts) and have accepted their identities as Americans, with the South Asian part of their identity receiving stereotypical treatment.

If the South Asian woman is not represented as a model minority, such as in the case of Rebecca, then she does not appear to have a race. Under this color-blind model, Rebecca's portrayal by a South Asian actor does not factor into her character's story or her interactions with her sorority sisters or her fellow students at the university. The show does not address her race perhaps because of ideas of postracial America as the cultural ideal or the show's creators or writers believe that race is not an issue for students who attend a private university, and can afford to take part in the Greek system. Perhaps, this is a reflection of the dominant rhetoric surrounding class; that is ideally, once you are a member of the upper strata of socio-economic class, issues such as racism do not apply. Perhaps this can also be taken as an allusion to the model minority stereotype, after all, if the mainstream media portray South Asian Americans as educated professionals who are independently wealthy, then the message Rebecca's character leaves us with is one of acceptance, but only if you fulfill certain criteria.

This view appears to be further cemented by the romantic relationships that each of the characters (with the exception of Sunny) engages in. Neela has four suitors over the course of the series, none of whom are South Asian. Of the four all are doctors and

only one is black, and even then he dies in combat while in Iraq. The other three suitors are all white. While the man she ends up with is a double amputee, we learn that he has realistic prosthetics that enables him to walk and resume his life as normal.

For Kelly, both of her suitors on the show have not been South Asian men. In one comedic scene during the “Diwali” episode, her parents point out a South Asian suitor who is a doctor. Kelly responds by whining, “Why would I want to date a doctor?” Obviously, this is for comic effect but it creates the impression that Kelly is more interested in her white boyfriend, and in defiance of her family’s traditional stance wants to continue seeing him. This again reinforces the idea that the “good” kind of raced woman assimilates and integrates into the majority race. Finally, Rebecca, who only has one relationship on the show, dates a white male. The only other man she engages in sexual relations with in the series is also white. However, given that the majority of the cast is white, this does not seem surprising.

These four characters, while interesting and complex, all have one thing in common: their representations waver between favorable, ridiculous and stereotypical in a racial sense but do not appear to be “evil” or “bad”. None of the characters are depicted as highly aggressive or sexually immoral women, nor are they cast as asexual and mothering. This is surprising because of the historical representations of women of color in the media, but not unaccountable. The next section will explore the reasons behind these favorable impressions, and why the media continues to perpetuate them.

Chapter 10:

Neoliberalism and Multicultural Representations

Historically, the most visible minorities in the United States were African Americans, Latinos and Asian Americans. South Asian Americans did not really appear in large numbers until after the immigration laws were changed in 1965, which allowed for entering the country legally under several different categories. The first who came were primarily skilled, educated workers followed by those who came to be reunited with their families (Leonard, 1997). Recently, under the new immigration laws and the introduction of the H1-B visas, more highly skilled migrants have come to live in the United States, a large majority of them South Asian and working in the science and technology sectors (Ong 162). It is likely that it is this increase in highly skilled workers in these fields that has served as the basis of the model minority myth.

The model minority myth was initially, in the 1960s, about East Asians (people of Japanese, Chinese and Korean ethnicities) who were doing well for themselves and succeeding financially (Richwine). Today, model minority status has been bestowed upon the South Asian population of the United States. For instance, an article recently published on the Forbes.com website discusses the prominence of Indian Americans dominating the spelling bee, and links this somehow to their overall ‘success’: “It’s tempting to dismiss Indian-American⁴ dominance of the spelling bee as just a cultural

⁴ The term Indian American is often used interchangeably with the term South Asian American, due in part to the large numbers of Indian Americans who make up the South Asian American community in the United States (Leonard, 1997). However, the term can prove to be problematic, in part, because using Indian American and South Asian

idiosyncrasy. But Indian success in more important fields is just as eye-catching,” (Richwine).

Richwine further describes how it is South Asians’ stereotypical superior intellect that allows them to succeed where others have not. “When statistical adjustments are used to convert the backward digit span results to full-scale IQ scores, Indian Americans place at about 112 on a bell-shaped IQ distribution, with white Americans at 100. 112 is the 79th percentile of the white distribution. For more context, consider that Ashkenazi Jews are a famously intelligent ethnic group, and their mean IQ is somewhere around 110.” While he does go on to caution the reader from taking these scores too seriously, he himself says they are an indicator of their achievements in the United States! This is a classic case of media misrepresentation, and only further perpetuates the stereotype of South Asians and South Asian Americans. Additionally, it further reinforces the validity of racist scientific studies that were, and still are, employed to rationalize racism against communities of color.

Furthermore, the “facts” in this article serve as evidence for a change in immigration policy in the United States to one based on the successes of certain races. Communities that succeed financially and professionally would have greater priority in their abilities to immigrate, over communities that have not, even at the expense of family reunification. This argument clearly focuses on the neoliberal ethic of personal responsibility rewards those “others” who are seen as conforming and accepting of what it means to be “American” while punishing those who do not; relying on the state for financial support, lacking employment and being undereducated are all transgressions

American interchangeably denies other non-Indian, South Asian Americans recognition in the public sphere.

against the dogma of personal responsibility, and as such communities that overwhelmingly commit these sins must be punished by keeping their families apart.

The executive director of a South Asian organization wrote a direct response to this article, detailing why such rhetoric in the media was damaging to both the South Asian community and other communities of color. “As with all communities, Indian Americans do not come in the same shape and form, and cannot be treated as a monolith.... Beneath the seemingly positive use of the “model minority” label is a pernicious racist undertone: the purpose, after all, is to compare one set of people with another, and the result is to pit minorities against one another,” (Iyer). As Iyer notes, these claims of model minorities work divisively against communities of color, when shared immigrant experiences may unite them otherwise.

The “awarding” of the model minority status appears to be linked to and rooted in neoliberal policies. As neoliberalism heralds privatization of services that we normally might perceive as state responsibilities (education, health, even punishment), personal responsibility is pushed heavily in conjunction with the privatization of these sectors (Duggan 22). The individual should not rely on the state to provide these services, but instead embrace the free market capitalist principles of neoliberalism and “shop around” for the best providers of these services. As the Richwine article suggests, South Asians and their perceived financial success as a community have made them the perfect neoliberal citizen. Their power to purchase, and consume allows them greater rewards and recognition from the government than other racial minorities.

This works in two ways, both having to do with immigration. South Asians are awarded greater numbers of the H1-B immigration visa, which secures highly skilled

workers (Ong 165). Because a large percentage of these visa issuances have been primarily used for IT workers, the stereotype of the upper middle class, educated, professional is perpetuated in the media. Secondly, because the South Asian immigrants who are awarded the H1-B visa work in fields that pay well, such as the science and technology sectors, they are considered to be financially self-sufficient, without any reliance on state support. Their ability to provide for themselves and consume services within the economy makes them the perfect neoliberal citizen.

Neoliberalism, as Duggan states, values the citizen who is able to participate in consumerism, but it is also an ideology that reinforces racial and cultural stereotypes, marking those who refuse to adhere to white heteronormative ways of living as “irresponsible” and as “other” (43). This brand of “multiculturalism” respects the diversity of the American populace, as long as it fits within the view of the white heteronormative perspective. Gay couples whose families are structured liked the heteronormative family have been rewarded with implicit recognition in government and workplace policies and within greater society. South Asian Americans, who appear to have assimilated into the population, that is, they are perfect consumers and do not rely on the state for “handouts” are then seen as the “model minority”. To those who believe this about South Asians, their behavior is unlike other racial minorities: they do not appear to have broken homes, or have single mothers who continuously have large numbers of children and then look to the state for a handout or have a large number of children who drop out of high school.

In fact, as media representations show, South Asian Americans have normal heteronormative families that support their focus on higher education and push them to

become independent adults who are fiscally responsible. Especially with the female characters analyzed in this paper, their relationships (all of which have been heteronormative) further cement the idea that South Asian Americans do not act outside of expected societal norms. This lip service to diversity, or multiculturalism simply supports a societal view of white heteronormative practices.

Characterizing the world as “us versus them” creates the “other” as condensed into a single category; the basic understanding is that you are white through your actions, lifestyle and behavior despite the color of your skin. The seemingly white, but actually raced family, makes it more palatable to accept the other into the fold of mainstream society. The overwhelming message then becomes, if you wish to be accepted you must assimilate and behave like “real” Americans. Because if you do not behave, and take personal responsibility, then you will be left outside the system and cannot gain from it. As Hill Collins points out, the structural lack of resources for black people in the United States is evidence of this neoliberal ethic, which she also refers to as “new racism” (“Hip Hop” 54).

This new racism “relies more heavily on the manipulation of ideas within mass media. These new techniques present hegemonic ideologies that claim that racism is over,” (“Hip Hop” 54). While Hill Collins’ *Black Sexual Politics* focuses on the African American community within the United States, her arguments regarding class ideologies can be applied to the South Asian communities. As she explains that middle-class African Americans are seen as “authentic and respectable” in comparison to African Americans of the poor and working classes (“Politics” 177), we can infer that those “others” that also fall into the middle class category are seen as authentic and respectable.

The perpetuation of the idea that South Asian Americans are primarily middle class, educated professionals thus marking them as “authentic and respectable” pits them against other racial minorities who do not display the same characteristics. Therefore the women on these television shows, and in Lahiri and Divakaruni’s stories, are cut from that same “authentic” and “respectable” cloth. Whether it is reflected in their family backgrounds, or their professions or their presence in a university setting, they are all marked as the respectable and authentic Other. Additionally, the characterization of the South Asian American women on television includes their relationships with white men. Hill Collins’ states that this reflects a white gender ideology too, these women are in culturally appropriate relationships where the strong white man who is heralded as the protector, and the right partner for a woman (“Hip Hop” 178). We see this to be especially true with Neela’s character on *ER*, who continuously needs to be rescued, usually by her love interest, and by the lack of South Asian male suitors for any of the characters. Their acceptance into mainstream, white heteronormative society relies on their ability to act as white and heteronormative as possible. “The closer one approaches Whiteness, the more likely one is to be seen as an individual and to be granted the rights of first-class citizenship,” (“Hip Hop” 179). While we do see a divergence here between the characters on television and the characters in Lahiri’s and Divakaruni’s short stories – most if not all of the characters are in romantic relationships with men of the same ethnic and racial background – the literary characters still reflect a heteronormative imagining of romantic relationships. The queer is left unaddressed on both television and on the page.

Chapter 11:

South Asian Americans as First-Class Citizens

These representations of South Asian women as conforming to media perpetuated stereotypes are problematic in many ways. As shown, notions of South Asian femininity are tied to familial backgrounds, cultural practices and relationships with white men; the appearance of South Asians as university educated professionals and model citizens do not adequately describe a community that is heterogeneous across race, gender, religion, class and sexualities. The images that the media subjects us to ignore the real life experiences of members of the South Asian communities, and erase their struggles and experiences to paint a picture of racial harmony and inclusion. As Iyer stated in her response to the model minority myth, South Asians not only occupy the top brackets of the socio-economic class strata they also include illegal immigrants, working class families, non-heteronormative families and queer individuals to name just a few, all of whom are not represented in the media. Their erasure from public eye denies them the opportunity to speak and present their real life experiences to the public and to combat the stereotypes that exist.

As stereotypes go, the model minority myth at first look seems harmless, even positive, but in reality it does not allow for other members of the South Asian community who do not fit the image of the model minority to receive assistance, gain recognition or seek justice for inequalities that they endure. Their experiences are denied as real because the perpetuated stereotypes do not allow for alternate explanations of actual experiences. Furthermore, the myths use to separate the “good” raced other from the

“bad” raced other further divides communities of color in their work to achieve racial justice. This is seen distinctly within the analysis of the four female South Asian American characters on television when compared to the theories of visual representations of other women of color. The fact that these characters are not written as hyper sexualized, hyper aggressive raced women only further demonstrates that the model minority myth sets up the South Asian American, as the ideal raced American, while all other raced Americans fall short.

Iyer’s stance as a South Asian woman to negate the representation of the model minority myth is just one of many steps that South Asian communities are taking to ensure that such representations are disputed. Further activism, criticism and academic study is necessary to reject neoliberal ideals of model citizens and to recognize the diversity of the South Asian communities and the United States.

Chapter 12:

Conclusion

The analysis of both literary and television South Asian immigrant women characters reveals the discourse that is dominant within the public sphere. The representations of South Asian women simply reinforce ideas, and the idealized imagery, of the “good” immigrant citizen-subject. As we have seen, South Asian women on television do not fit within the parameters of historical representations of women of color in visual media, allowing for racial stratification – South Asian women are “good” immigrant or racial minority women, while Latinas and Black women are portrayed as irresponsible, aggressive and overtly sexual. South Asian women’s apparent assimilation into white, heteronormative society is also reflected in the literary texts analyzed in this paper, with particular emphasis on the rhetoric of freedom and choice within the United States.

These narratives prominent in the public sphere are problematic because they create the image of the South Asian immigrant woman in one particular way: educated, heteronormative and from an acceptable socio-economic class. Not only do these narratives erase the realities of all South Asian immigrant women who do not hail from similar backgrounds, it also reaffirms the hegemonic racial stratification that currently exists in the United States.

The neoliberal project has been successful in crafting idealized images of the immigrant citizen-subject, especially under the guise of “multiculturalism”. However, through an analysis of images presented to us not only by the public sphere, but also

counterpublic spheres constructive steps can be taken to enable and allow the voices of the marginalized to be heard and for them to be seen. Additionally, a rejection of multiculturalism and assimilation as imagined by the neoliberal ideology may provide the stepping-stones of collaboration between racial and ethnic minorities.

WORKS CITED

- Alquizola, Marilyn C. and Lane Ryo Hirabayashi. "Confronting Gender Stereotypes of Asian American Women: Slaying the Dragon." Reversing the Lens. Ed. Jun Xing and Lane Ryo Hirabayashi. Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2003.
- Anderson, Benedict. Imagined Communities. Revised ed. London: Verso Books, 2006.
- Bogle, Donald. Primetime Blues. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001.
- Brunsdon, Charlotte and Lynn Spigel, eds. Feminist Television Criticism: A Reader. 2nd ed. Maidenhead: McGraw Hill, 2008.
- Daiya, Kavita. Violent Belongings. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2008.
- Divakaruni, Chitra Banerjee. Arranged Marriage. New York: Anchor Books, 1995.
- ER. NBC. 2003-2009.
- Flores, Lisa A. and Michelle A. Holling. "Las Familias y Las Latinas: Mediated Representations of Gender Roles." Mediated Women: Representations in Popular Culture. Ed. Marian Meyers. Cresskill: Hampton Press Inc, 1999. 339-354.
- Fraser, Nancy. "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy." Social Text 25/26 (1990): 56-80.
- Greek. ABC Family. 2007-2009.
- Grewal, Inderpal. Transnational America. Durham: Duke University Press, 2005.

- Habermas, Jurgen. "The Public Sphere: An Encyclopedia Article." Media and Cultural Studies: Keywords (Revised Edition). Ed. Meenakshi Gigi Durham and Douglas M. Kellner. Oxford: Blackwell, 2006. 74-78.
- Hebdige, Dick. Subculture: Meaning of Style. London: Routledge, 1979.
- Hill Collins, Patricia. Black Sexual Politics. New York: Routledge, 2005.
- - - . From Black Power to Hip Hop. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2006.
- Iyer, Deepa. "Model Minority? No, Thanks." RaceWire. 26 Feb. 2009. 14 Apr. 2009
<http://www.racewire.org/archives/2009/02/model_minority_no_thanks_oped.html>
- Lahiri, Jhumpa. Interpreter of Maladies. Boston, New York: Mariner Books, 1999.
- Leonard, Karen Isaksen. The South Asian Americans. Westport: Greenwood Press, 1997.
- Mulvey, Laura. "Visual Pleasure in Narrative Cinema." The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader. Ed. Amelia Jones. London: Routledge, 2003. 44-52.
- Negt, Oskar and Alexander Kluge. Public Sphere and Experience: Toward an Analysis of the Bourgeois and Proletarian Public Sphere. Trans. Peter Labanyi, Jamie Owen Daniel and Assenka Oksiloff. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993.
- Ong, Aihwa. Neoliberalism as Exception. Durham: Duke University Press, 2006.
- Richwine, Jason. "Indian Americans: The New Model Minority." Forbes. 24 Feb. 2009. 14 Apr. 2009 <http://www.forbes.com/2009/02/24/bobby-jindal-indian-americans-opinions-contributors_immigrants_minority.html>
- Scrubs. ABC. 2009.

Shimizu, Celine Parrenas. The Hypersexuality of Race. Durham: Duke University Press, 2007.

Springer, Kimberly. "Divas, Evil Black Bitches and Bitter Black Women: African-American Women in Postfeminist and Post-Civil Rights Popular Culture." Interrogating Post-Feminism. Ed. Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra. Durham: Duke University Press, 2007. 249-276.

The Office. NBC. 2005-2009.

United States. Bureau of the Census. "QT-P3. Race and Hispanic or Latino: 2000."

Census 2000. 1 Apr. 2000. 27 Apr. 2009

<http://factfinder.census.gov/servlet/QTTable?_bm=y&-geo_id=01000US&-qr_name=DEC_2000_SF1_U_QTP3&-ds_name=DEC_2000_SF1_U&-_lang=en&-redoLog=false&-format=&-CONTEXT=qt>