

Do You See Me? The Invisible Woman

A young brown girl from Pakistan gets called a terrorist every time she enters her school bus and brushes it off with laughter because assimilation is easier than confronting prejudice. She is looking for a place to fit in so she chooses not to make waves that are too big. She is socialized to operate in uncharted territory in hopes of being seen for herself one day because most rooms that she is in forget that she is there. The South Asian experience is ignored in American society because ideological apparatuses like the media socialize brown women and girls to aspire to whiteness without affording them the privilege of being white.

Socializing the brown woman

South Asian women are socialized to operate in approved behavior which is heavily rooted in patriarchal and colonial systems of oppression. The plight of the brown girl is a stereotype that apparatuses like the media breath into life and force the brown woman to conform to in the construction of her own identity. The work of Louis Althusser in his 1970 essay called “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses” is essential to understanding how the experiences of South Asian women are ignored in major institutions that are integral to a fully-functioning society. Althusser emphasizes the importance of ideological apparatuses which are tools of the state used to emulate acceptable social behaviors for the subjects of the state, which for our case are South Asian women. Althusser describes how an ideological apparatus, which is an institution of the state, functions:

“Ideological apparatuses function massively and predominantly by *ideology*, but they also function secondarily by repression, even if ultimately, but only ultimately, this is very attenuated and concealed, even symbolic. Thus Schools and Churches use suitable

methods of punishment, etc, to “discipline” not only their shepherds, but also their flocks.

The same is true of the Family... The same is true of the cultural IS Apparatus

(censorship, among other things, etc).” (12)

The media is a form of a cultural apparatus that uses various kinds of mediums to disseminate ideology to the masses. It is a core aspect of contemporary society given that most people learn about the world around them through the news, books, documentaries and other content. In the media, South Asian women are rarely represented. They are grouped in the larger macro-category of Asian Americans and their experiences are also homogenized to those of East-Asian Americans. In reality, the complexities of people from Asia are masked by the blanket of generalization and ignorance.

Movies like Aladdin socialize young brown girls from the beginning to aspire to goals only tied to their restricting gender role as “woman”. From the casting of the show to the fantasyland created to shove the cultures of Asia into one, most works in the media refuse to give women from Asia a clear identity as an independent individual who is complex and comes from a complex history. Many of these stereotypes are examined further in this paper and are also traced back to their colonial roots that continue to be upheld by white ignorance.

Stereotypes “othering” the brown woman

As the media is the ideological apparatus that upholds ideologies that force brown women into roles that undermine their autonomy, the stereotypes attached to these institutions are the ones primarily responsible in the erasure of the complex lived experience of a South Asian woman. Chandra Talpade Mohanty’s “Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial discourse” uses multiple examples of western feminist theory to pinpoint how scholars

have constructed the concept of the “third world woman” used to categorize the struggles of women in the developing world. We will specifically be examining the constructions of this myth in relation to the South Asian woman. One of the most popular stereotype associated with South Asian women is the one that portrays them as passive victims of their own culture, specifically male violence in their communities. This stereotype ignores the social, political and economic autonomy of the brown woman and only categorizes her based on her powerless, status as a victim of particular socio-economic systems.

The third world woman stereotype is the homogenization of the oppression and the lived experiences of women in the developing world because “ this average third world woman leads an essentially truncated life based on her feminine gender (read: sexually constrained) and being “third world” (read: ignorant, poor, uneducated, tradition-bound, domestic, family-oriented, victimized etc)” (Mohanty 337). This picture of the brown woman from the developing world is posed in contrast to the Western woman who is educated, modern, independent and is given the power by western society to live as a free individual. Stereotypes like these in western discourse automatically place South Asian women below white women because they are regarded as incompetent. An entire population of women cannot be passive so such a stereotype constructs the helpless brown woman. This is detrimental to the socialization of South Asian American women today because the media is largely dominated by people creating stories that mostly portray brown women as passive victims of violence stemming directly from their own religion or culture.

Stereotypes like these interpellate brown women into identities that may feel unfamiliar to their own lived experience. Althusser’s concept of interpellation explains that individuals come to think of themselves in the social categories in which they are addressed in. If brown

women are already rarely represented, the kind of representation they see in today's media is critical to building their own identity. Not all representation is good representation and many South Asians have learned to be okay with the bare minimum. This bare minimum still is not enough given that it most of the time emulates realities attached to the South Asian experience that are simply easier for western audiences to swallow. Not all South Asian women come from restricting backgrounds and they are not all victims to their heritage. South Asian women largely have to occupy spaces that are not created for them and are forced to internalize ignorant comments. Ignorant comments that ask them if they have basic rights in their country or if they are allowed to breath freely. Much of this ignorance is rooted in a colonial framework that upholds white ignorance and continues to push the complexities of South Asian culture further into silence.

White ignorance & brown ties

Charles W. Mills' "White Ignorance" provides theoretical context on discourse which proves that the "othering" of nonwhite people is directly linked to white ignorance which is the foundation upon which white supremacist concepts like the white savior complex are born out of. Whiteness is the concept that stands as the superior comparison to the non-white experience and existence. Mills writes that "whiteness is originally coextensive with full humanity, so that the nonwhite Other is grasped through a historic array of concepts whose common denominator is their subject' location on a lower ontological and moral rung" (238). The oppression of the brown woman is constructed in comparison to the freedom of a western white woman whose privilege shields her from the dangers of the world. This creation of the passive brown woman is a concept born out of the need to appease the white savior, or the white man's pride in this

particular instance. The concept of the white savior is essential into understanding the picture painted by colonizers who worried about the plight of the brown and the perils she must be saved from because it works hand in hand with the “average third world woman”. The white colonizer will not have a subject to save if she is independent and acts of her own free will. So histories of South Asian queens and women who have revolutionized society in their communities are rarely told in the media.

The picture of the passive, always in need of saving is a stereotype upheld not only by white ignorance but also for white fascination. Mills describing the othering of Native Americans when they are labeled as savages despite many who saved the lives of Jamestown colonists who couldn't provide for themselves during a harsh winter pushes the conversation towards perception. It is written that “the concept is driving the perception, with whites aprioristically intent on denying what is before them”(239). It is a conscious choice of white society to keep the brown woman hidden under false representation of passive and victim. This stereotype is traced all the way back to its colonial roots with works like “Our Moslem Sisters” and books that talk about the “Orient”. It is easier for white people to create false narratives and knowledges of the non-western world than to give space to non-white people to mold their own stories. This is a testimony into the experiences of brown women and South Asian people that still have to check either white or the macro-category of “Asian American” on the census or any other job application. South Asian women can tick off “white” in the box but for many brown people, whiteness has limits.

Limits of whiteness for brown women

South Asians have long been labeled as the model minority who works really well in the predominantly white system in America. The concept of the model minority, in this case South

Asians and Asian Americans, is used to compare their progress with the lack of progress in Black and Hispanic communities. This concept in itself is demeaning because it largely ignores tactics of systemic racism and its effect on Black and Brown lives but it is also abhorrent since it demoralizes the struggles of South Asian Americans. By being posed as the perfect immigrant, South Asians are “othered” even in their own accomplishments. Their achievements are posed as a gift of white society where non-whites can also achieve the same level of prestige that white people have. It has become a testimony that traps South Asian Americans into whiteness only when it is convenient for them to part of the group.

Neda Maghbouleh’s book called “The Limits of Whiteness” explains how whiteness is a terrain where certain accepted groups of non-white people emulating specific behaviors are accepted. But there are limits to that whiteness especially for all non-white people and in this case for brown women. Neda offers the reader to understand the two key concepts that come with this flexible whiteness. She says

“The first, “racial hinges”, captures how the geographic and political specter of a racially liminal group, like Iranians (in our case, South Asian women), can be marshaled by a variety of legal and extralegal actors into a symbolic hinge that opens or closes the door to whiteness as necessary. The second, “racial loopholes”, describe the everyday contradictions and conflicts that emerge when a group’s legal racial categorization is inconsistent with its on-the-ground experience of racialization or deracialization” (5).

Brown women are given the respect of achieving the American dream and the space to not stand out as much as Black and Latinx women due to their racially ambiguous nature that can sometimes adopt the concept of whiteness to their own benefit. Yet, there are a variety of

instances where brown Muslim women or darker skinned brown women are victims of hate crimes and violence. It is only acceptable for brown women to be in spaces when they are there on the terms of white people that define whiteness. But if she is a black South Asian woman, if she is a queer South Asian woman or if she is anything that the white standard is not used to then the whiteness that the brown woman has been socialized to aspire to will dissipate.

In the end, there were some

Over 5.4 million South Asian Americans live in the United States today and their experiences are not reflected in essential sectors of society. The cloak of invisibility under which they function ignores the lived experiences of a massive part of the population. The ignorance of the South Asian experience perpetuates an incomplete picture of American society that feeds into a whitewashed narrative of what an American looks. If American culture doesn't reflect its people, it is a sham and it is our responsibility as citizens of society to give all the space that is rightfully theirs in the world.

This is a phenomenon that can be extended to a variety of other marginalized groups in the United States. Latinx Americans, Asian Americans and even Black Americans are socialized to aspire to standards rooted in whiteness which ignores their lived experiences by creating a white washed narrative of their identity in mass media. We should create a narrative of empowerment that is pushed in the media which authentically depicts the lived experiences of South Asian Americans. Brown women are much more than the domesticated housewives that only speak when spoken to. This space has to be one free of colonized thinking that forces women to conform their identities to enlighten white ignorance. South Asian Americans have to

be able to cement their identities into the fabric of American culture by being able to take up the space that is rightfully theirs.

Bibliography

Proctor, Robert, and Londa L. Schiebinger. *Agnology: the Making and Unmaking of Ignorance*. Stanford University Press, 2008.

Althusser, Louis. "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation)." *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses by Louis Althusser 1969-70*, <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/althusser/1970/ideology.htm>.

Maghbouleh, Neda. *The Limits of Whiteness Iranian Americans and the Everyday Politics of Race*. Stanford University Press, 2017.

Mohanty, Chandra Talpade. *Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourse*. Duke University Press, 1984.

Parvez, Bisma. "Opinion: Can The Real Brown Women Please Stand Up?" *HuffPost*, HuffPost, 12 Mar. 2018, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/opinion-parvez-south-asian-brown-women_n_5aa0438ee4b002df2c604fad.