

Janani Subramanian

Flow Response: "Just Satire? Minority Television Culture and Post-Racial Ideologies"

I grew up with South Asian immigrant parents, and my earliest memories are marked by our family's constant consumption of American situation comedies. *Three's Company*, *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, *Taxi*, *The Facts of Life* and *The Cosby Show* were nightly events over the years, and only until recently, as I looked at their strange assortment of TV on DVD (from *Golden Girls* to *Seinfeld*), have I wondered about their unlikely taste for sitcoms that seemingly have nothing to do with them. None of the shows in question featured prominent Asian, let alone South Asian, characters, and the show that did feature people of color – *The Cosby Show* – rarely addressed topics of race and ethnicity in any consistent fashion.

Contemporary situation comedies have diversified both in format and the ethnic make-up of casts – in the current network television landscape, *The Office*, *Parks and Recreation*, and *The Big Bang Theory* all feature South Asian characters in major roles (of course *The Office*'s Mindy Kaling acquired her own situation comedy in the 2012-2013 season). As a loyal viewer of all three of these programs, I came to a kind of ethnic epiphany a few months ago that I could see myself – my cultural background in particular – reflected back on screen. My experience growing up with American sitcom-loving parents encouraged me to think more about my identification (or lack thereof) with the characters in these three shows – what about the structure and thematic nature of the contemporary American sitcom has changed in recent years to allow for a “smuggled-in” (to use the wording of the roundtable) version of multiculturalism? As I watched the characters of Kelly Kapoor (Mindy Kaling), Tom Haverford (Aziz Ansari), and Raj Koothrappali (Kunal Nayyar), I began thinking more about their representations as non-white ethnic Americans and South Asians in a post-9/11, “post-racial” television landscape.

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My initial attempts to form an argument for this project were prompted by an off-hand comment by my husband, who laughingly said that Indians are the new token minorities of today's sitcoms. Historically, situation comedies, while often varied in terms of representations of class and gender, are often racially segregated (all-black sitcoms) or marked, as my husband said, by a "token" minority character. The prime examples of an all-Asian situation comedy, Margaret Cho's *All-American Me*, failed in terms of ratings (but succeeded in critical acclaim), while all-South Asian situation comedies have fared well in the United Kingdom (*The Kumars at No. 42*). Those with mixed-race casts or that are centered on multiculturalism itself (*Aliens in America*, *Outsourced*) have been canceled, although shows like *In Living Color* or *Scrubs* did succeed in terms of ratings and criticism – again, though, *In Living Color* was a variety show and *Scrubs* featured a primarily white cast with one black and one Hispanic character as series regulars.

My question is: how do we situate characters like Kelly, Tom and Raj within the history of situation comedies as well as within a consideration of South Asians in American culture in general, particularly in the contexts of globalization and 9/11? Muslim and South Asian communities of course faced increasing discrimination after 9/11, but the subsequent overemphasis on American patriotism and security also led to questions of citizenship – what did it mean to have brown skin and call yourself an American? As South Asian characters in American network programming, perhaps a close examination of the ways Kelly, Tom and Raj are represented – in terms of character construction and the styles of their respective shows – can shed light on how multiculturalism is both embraced and resisted within American popular

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culture in an allegedly post-racial social landscape. To briefly address each character: Kelly Kapoor, played by comedian Mindy Kaling (originally Vera Chokalingam), has been a character on *The Office*, where she played (until this year) a customer service representative for Dunder Mifflin. Her character is flighty and superficial and makes small but incorrect comments about her Indian American heritage. The only episode that deals entirely with Kelly's background is the "Diwali" episode (Season 3, 2006), where Kelly invites the office to a local Hindu Diwali festival; predictably Michael Scott makes culturally inappropriate jokes, Dwight knows the most about the holiday, and Kelly tries to introduce her white boyfriend Ryan to her parents (played by her actual parents), who subsequently try to set up her with an Indian doctor. As reviewers commented, this is one of the first times the holiday has been represented on American television – how do we consider that kind of cultural representation and exposure with the *mode* of its representation – a "sitcom verite" style that is marked by the deadpan humor of its primarily white actors, but one that also features a South Asian American actor/writer/producer who is translating much of her own experience with the holiday to the screen?