

Race in 21st Century Television: How Much Has Changed?

“Usually you look like a piñata”: Mindy Kaling and Fashioning Brown

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My co-author, Linde Murugan and I, are both avid consumers of the Mindy Kaling “brand,” and we have noticed that she is talked about in two primary ways: as a South Asian American and as a particular body type. As Linde and I argue in this paper, though, the two avenues of difference are not mutually exclusive and in fact are deeply imbricated in Kaling’s star text and its positioning within contemporary pop culture. For example, the recent backlash against her 2014 February *ELLE* magazine cover revealed the ongoing negotiations contemporary culture makes around race, bodies and branding; according to Kaling, the cropped B&W cover photograph had little to do with either her race or her weight, yet consumers and fans expressed disappointment for its stark difference from the full-body images of her white, slim television colleagues on alternate covers.

We ultimately aim to explore how Kaling’s self-fashioning in her television program, books, and social media presence relate to both South Asian racial identity and multiculturalism in the contemporary television landscape. For the purposes of this response, we would like to focus briefly on Kaling’s Fox sitcom, *The Mindy Project* (FOX, 2013-), which stars Kaling as New York City ob-gyn Mindy Lahiri, who wades through a dating life of hookups, wishful thinking, and almost perfect long-term monogamous relationships. Mindy joins a legion of television’s iconic single girls, beginning with *That Girl* (ABC, 1966-1971) and *Mary Tyler Moore* (CBS, 1970-1977) and extending into the early 2000s with *Ally McBeal* (Fox, 1997-2002) and *Sex and the City* (HBO, 1998-2004). These heroines, while wading through the feminist and post-feminist politics that marked their eras, were also clothed and heeled in very specific ways, giving fashion the connotations of urbanity, activity, and sexuality and presenting a feminine mastery of urban space, complete with several colorful wardrobe changes.¹ *The Mindy Project* differentiates itself from the most-recent round of single-girl programs, such as *New Girl* (Fox, 2011-Present), *Girls* (HBO, 2012-Present), and *Broke Girls* (CBS, 2011-Present), because its heroine is economically secure and committed to her job, affording her more play when it comes to self-presentation. Mindy’s indulgence in a variety of colorful prints adds to the visual pleasures of the program - fun changeable accoutrements that accessorize Mindy’s curvy Indian body. Along these lines, *The Mindy Project* also stands out from these other shows because its heroine is not white and does not conform to the slim body type of her televisual peers. Kaling/Lahiri’s ethnic identity is referred to occasionally in the show’s narratives yet mostly in relation to her appearance. The consumption of fashion is presented as key to Kaling’s identity; the ways her brown skin and body become visible in the show is therefore directly linked to her particular brand of millennial racial politics.

¹ Fashion show segments were part of 1950s programs like *Home* (NBC, 1954-1957) and *Queen for a Day* (NBC, 1956-1960). See Marsha Cassidy, *What Women Watched: Daytime Television in the 1950s* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2005).

In the spirit of the mod styling on *That Girl* and the fashion-forward clashing on *Ugly Betty*, Mindy wears colors that pop and nicely complement her brown skin. Similar to Costume Designer Patricia Field's garish mix of prints on *Ugly Betty*, Salvador Perez, Jr. is not afraid to dress Kaling in clashing colors and patterns. In the pilot, Mindy shows off her first date outfit, which is a silver sequined and beaded butterfly tunic dress. Co-worker and sparring possible love interest, Danny Castellano, snaps, "Is your date with Elton John? On New Year's Eve?" Her insistence on wearing what most would find outlandish or unflattering not only adds to her spunky character, but also goes against common women's fashion magazine directives for the non-skinny to wear black and not draw attention to their bodies. Yet the show refuses to delve into body angst – Mindy performs an ambivalence towards her body, alternating between refreshing confidence and an understanding that the world, specifically the dating world of upwardly mobile New Yorkers, is not made for women who look like her. In other episodes, comments about Mindy's wardrobe take on a more racialized bent – one potential suitor asks if she is a "black congressman's mistress," while another says she looks like a "rapper's publicist" when he first sees her.

Kaling provides a challenging example of the subtle ways race, celebrity and the entertainment industry are constantly intertwined, as well as an opportunity to discuss whether TV visibility, in all its guises, translates to challenging and progressive racial politics. We ask whether looking different can translate to feeling different and how, if at all, does one's feeling different propel them towards a politic?