

Sample Essay II Title: The Social Construction of Gender for South Asian American Women

Introduction

This paper examines the social construction of gender for South Asian American Women. I begin with a brief review of what the scholarship says. I then introduce examples for this group that I found, and I examine how each example constructs them. In the final section, I discuss patterns in these cases and how they compare to what the scholarship says. I end with a discussion of how the social construction of gender for South Asian women in the US compares to dominant norms of femininity.

The Scholarship on South Asian American Women

The scholarship on South Asian American women emphasizes a number of things. Broadly speaking, South Asian immigrant women in the US must navigate expectations about their identities and behaviors that emanate from the dominant society as well as from their own immigrant communities. On the one hand, South Asian immigrant communities expect immigrants, and women immigrants in particular, to comply by rules of ‘authentic culture’ in terms of their dress, dating and marital practices, knowledge of religious and cultural rituals, ability to cook ethnic food, and so on (Das Gupta 1997; Narayan 1997). On the other hand, despite their often considerable educational and professional accomplishments of many of these women, the larger society still sees them primarily as submissive and dependent (Purkayastha 2005). Some scholars also point to the changed racial context since 9/11. While South Asians have long had to deal with racist stereotypes in the US, since 9/11 racial tensions which cast them as ‘other’ have heightened (Maira 2004). Navigating particular pressures from within their own communities, as well as the larger US society, then, South Asian American women experience gender in fairly distinct ways.

The Social Location of South Asian American Women: Some Examples

In what follows, I discuss eight examples of the social construction of South Asian American women and in particular, the social construction of their gender, organized by four key themes: Learning and Doing Gender, Buying and Selling Gender, Gender and Work, and Gender and Intimate Relationships. I end this discussion with a brief discussion of the patterns I see in my examples.

Learning and Doing Gender

1. My first example is Vicco Turmeric Skin Whitening Cream, available on Amazon.com see <https://www.amazon.com/dp/B00UCEFD74?psc=1>) and Indian grocery stores in the US. The product shows a South Asian woman with light skin, presumably due to the use of the cream. The message here is that dark skin is bad. For South Asian women who have dark skin, they can lighten it with the use of this cream.



2. My second example is the reaction to an Indian American woman winning the Miss America pageant in 2014. See for example, https://www.buzzfeed.com/ryanhatethis/a-lot-of-people-are-very-upset-that-an-indian-american-woman?utm_term=.hkmglQoa0#.yud3Wv1Pq, which chronicles some of the racist tweets that were circulated in the wake of her win. These tweets show that South Asian American women are still not accepted as American. In this case, even though the winner obviously did femininity according to the rules of gender in the US (and so won “Miss America”), it was not enough. Her efforts were rejected, at least on the part of some.

Both of these examples show politics of race, nation and ethnicity that shape South Asian American women’s lives. They must deal with a preference for lighter skin—both in the broader society and in their own immigrant community. And they must deal with racialized context where they are not really “American.”

Buying and Selling Gender

1. My first example is the character Cece on the current Fox television show *New Girl*. The following image is from Season 1, a time when Cece is a supermodel. As a supermodel, Cece’s character is often shown in very revealing, sexy clothing.



2. My second example is the character of Alex Parrish on the current ABC television show *Quantico*. The following image is a promotional poster provided by ABC, accessed on [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Quantico_\(season_2\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Quantico_(season_2)). The actress playing this character is a former Miss World, Indian actress Priyanka Chopra.



Both of these examples show that South Asian American women are increasingly visible in the US context, as main characters and supporting characters on popular television shows. However, played by highly sexualized women, both examples perhaps show the hypersexualized character

of this visibility in the US. Thus if South Asian American women are increasingly being accepted in the US, this acceptance is dependent on sexual appeal.

Gender and Work

1. My first example is the character of Mindy on the Fox television show *The Mindy Project* (see <http://huluwatcher.com/2016/08/29/when-will-the-mindy-project-season-5-be-on-hulu/>, accessed). The show ran from 2012 until 2015, when it was canceled. It was then picked up by Hulu.com. In the series, the character of Mindy is shown as a ditzy but successful doctor.



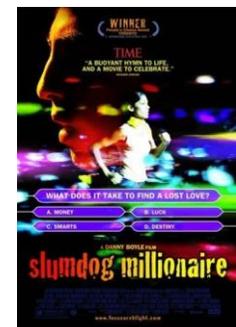
2. My second example is Vanita Gupta, the South Asian American head of the US Department of Justice Civil Rights Division in the Obama Administration. This image comes from this story: <http://www.sandiegouniontribune.com/sdut-vanita-gupta-head-of-the-justi-20160819-photo.html>. In this image, we see Gupta speaking of the DOJ investigation into the Baltimore City Police Department and its use of excessive force against minority communities.



These examples show that both in fiction and reality, there are public examples of South Asian women achieving professional success in the US.

Gender and Intimate Relationships

1. My first example is the character of Latika from the British 2008 movie *Slumdog Millionaire*, which won a number of Oscars and enjoyed high visibility in the US. The following is the promotional poster provided by Fox Searchlight, the studio that produced the film (<http://www.foxsearchlight.com/slumdogmillionaire/>). The character is a western stereotype of Indian women: subordinate and dependent. The film depicts Latika's abuse and victimization by a series of "bad guys" (including a group that wants to use her as a dancer and prostitute and a domineering and abusive boyfriend) and her ultimate rescue by a "good guy," the film's main character. Focused on her victimization and rescue, the film does not show the character as having any agency of her own.



2. My second example is the construction of real life person, Huma Abedin, in the following article, "Huma Abedin: The Good Wife Stands by her Man" (see <http://www.the-broad->

side.com/huma-abedin-the-good-wife-stands-by-her-man). Abedin has a presence in the public both as Hillary Clinton's assistant and as the former wife of NY politician Anthony Weiner. At the time of this article, Abedin was still married to Weiner and was publicly supportive of him as he was caught in a sexting scandal. The article chastises Abedin for "standing by her man" instead of being more assertive.

Both examples construct South Asian American women as subordinate or weak in their intimate relationships to the men in their lives.

The Social Construction of Gender for South Asian Women in the US

Overall, the examples above show that South Asian women in the US are constructed in a number of ways. They are constructed as professionally successful, hypersexual, and subordinate in intimate relationships. They also do gender in a racialized context in which dark skin is still considered a problem and in which they are still not considered to be "American". These findings confirm a number of themes that emerged in the scholarship discussed at the beginning of this paper. In particular, they support the argument made by Purkayastha that despite their professional accomplishments, South Asian American women are still seen as subordinate and dependent. This is especially evident in the examples concerning their intimate relationships. Additionally, a few examples support Maira's discussion of the increasingly racialized context these women have had to deal with since 9/11.

These findings demonstrate that the social construction of gender for South Asian women is both similar to and different from dominant norms of femininity in the US. On the one hand, there is a similar emphasis on heterosexuality and on sexual appeal. In this context, I found no examples of queer South Asian American women. Some examples also show them as educationally and professionally successful, pointing to class privileges in the US. On the other hand, the politics of race, ethnicity, and nation, in which these women are constructed as not American and as subordinate in their relationships, and in which they deal with stigma against dark skin, is distinct. Based on these patterns, I argue that the social construction of gender for South Asian American women is shaped by processes having to do with (hetero)sexuality, class, nation, ethnicity and race. From an intersectional perspective, then, the social location of these women is distinct. South Asian American women experience gender in distinct ways in the US.

Bibliography

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