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How and Why has American Media Shifted the On-Screen Image of Asian Americans from Stereotypical Roles to Lead Roles?

Sohail Syed

Abstract

Growing up as an Asian American, I never really had a role model of sort that I could relate to entirely. There were the general characters in movies that I looked up to but there was never that one character that I could possibly see myself as because there was never any lead characters that looked like me. Every time an Asian character was showed on-screen they were never a normal relatable person; they were always rather a living stereotype or unrealistic. Asians are always portrayed as intellectuals that are very awkward and geeky or one who has a very thick ethnic accent. Apart from Aladdin and Jackie Chan there never was a core Asian character who I looked up to as a role model. So, growing up there was always a stigma towards me that I had to be very Asian or very smart.

Ever since Asians immigrated to the United States, they were being portrayed by the media in one form or another. The portrayal was often stereotyped extensively which affected the public's viewpoint towards Asian Americans. But in the recent decade the portrayal of Asian Americans has shifted to a more positive and everyday image. So, I wondered about how this happened and asked my research question, "**How and Why has American Media Shifted the On-Screen Image of Asian Americans from Stereotypical Roles to Lead Roles?**"

Background

In the United States, Asian Americans have been stereotyped from the moment they entered the United States. With the use of media, stereotypes such as the "Model Minority," "Nerdy and Left Out," and "Undesirables," have been created targeting Asian Americans (Yang, 41-42,61). During the influx of Asians into America as a new labor force, there was a sort of "Yellow Peril" in which Americans feared the immigration would "Asianize the society and culture of the US" (Yang, 4,9). This brought the use of "Yellowface" in which white actors would play Asian roles which defined the Asian American image (Tung, 5). As time progressed to the current Hollywood industry, a "Minority Quota" of sort was established to ensure diversity in the industry (Tung, 91).

In the past there was the image of Asians seen from "Dr. Fu Manchu," "Dragon Ladies," and the use of gender roles from males being "asexual" and females being "hypersexualized objects" (Mok, 186, 191-192, 197). Also the use of "yellowface" was very prominent (Tung, 5). In today's media the roles of Asians are being brought to a more positive and non-stereotyped light seen from Dev Patel in Lion and Aziz Ansari in Master of None. These roles aren't just "quota" filling but are rather roles of real quality (Tung, 91).

With 5% of the United States population being Asian American, the effect of not having an Asian character/role model can play into the development of an Asian population. The developing human psyche of Asian American children can easily be affected, while these stereotypes can play a role in the schooling of Asian Americans.

Analysis

- Stereotypes have a cultural impact on the upbringing of children
- positive stereotypes can be just as harmful as negative stereotypes
- Stereotypes are created out of fear, confinement, and dislike
- With the influx of more Asian actors, more Asian roles are being made
- Hollywood must take action in promoting the image of Asians on-screen
- The lack of representation of Asians on-screen has led to many Asian children growing up believing they could never join the arts
- There are mental health effects associated with growing up with these stereotypes.
- Minorities in general don't want to be casted by Hollywood executives as it would make a show "too Asian," "too Black," or "too Hispanic."
- It is possible to have television/film media in which the character is Asian and relatable
- Public opinion towards Asians determines representation, positive or negative in film/television

Figure 1:
Dev Patel in Lion as the main lead
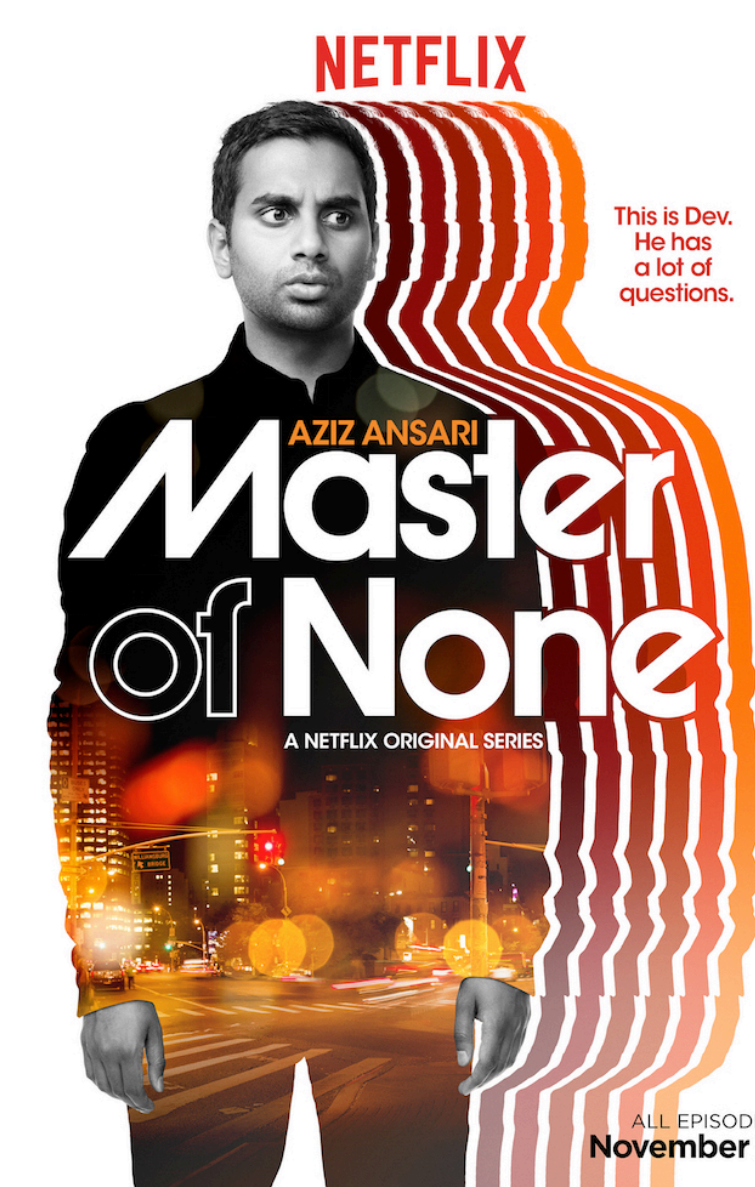
Figure 2:
Aziz Ansari in Master of None as the main lead

Figure 3:
Mickey Rooney in "yellowface" in Breakfast at Tiffany's

Discussion

The reasoning for Asian American stereotypes can stem from the Yellow Peril, as there already was fear against the Asian laborers that brought Asians to a negative viewing by the majority white population. Because of historical events including many East Asian nations in allied and enemy nations the images of Asians in television and film fluctuates.

Looking into the "Model Minority" stereotype, it is easily seen how and why roles have shifted from stereotyped roles to lead roles. Although the Model Minority is a stereotype, it puts Asian Americans sort of above other minority groups. Because the Asian minority group is seen as better in the public eye, the shift from stereotypes was necessary because in today's Hollywood industry, diversity is necessary and most media do not wish to offend. Also the on-screen roles need to match public perception or else they would not be relatable.

Lion and Master of None are prime examples of how talented Asians actors have allowed for this shift to occur. Although Lion follows a very Indian story, the movie does not define any of the characters by a stereotype or the culture and displays how an Asian actor can successfully carry a movie. Master of None expresses how Asian actors and actresses can play lead roles that are relatable to anyone.

This shift was necessary as many generations of Asian Americans have grown up with stereotypes and have been defined by these stereotypes. Many Asian American children grow up with a stigma that they must be a certain way as "Asians have always been that way." but because of the lack of relatable Asian characters, the developing psyche is often effected. And as these children go to school, they are often triggered into being "the Nerdy and Left Out."

Acknowledgments

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