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Indian American Representation From Ansari to Lahiri
Introduction:

U.S. Media Culture and Representation

The expansive influence of media is able to dictate cultural normatives and expectations. Social media platforms, movies, television shows, and even modern literature portray dominant readings that influence society. As cultural critic Douglas Kellner explains, “radio, television, film, and the other products of media culture provide materials out of which we forge our identities; our sense of selfhood” (7). Not only can media influence outwardly into the exterior world, such as politics, religion, and activism, but it also works as a source that individuals use to explain and understand themselves. Thus, media reaches inwardly as well. The scope of media is also extensive. Norms surrounding gender expression and sexual identification, age dynamics, disability, race and nationality, and a wide range of other topics are all covered by one media source or another. There is nothing that media has not, or will not, touch. With this in mind, representation becomes an incredibly important issue. As media sources become cultural scholars for a majority of individuals, the way different people groups are represented becomes even more poignant. Historically, race has been one aspect within media that has lacked, or had skewed, representation. Although there seems to be an insurgence of television and movie characters with intersectional identities, this has not always been the case. African American and Asian American identities were cast aside within a majority of television and movies. Even if there were characters that held these identities, they were either highly racially stereotyped, or played by white people made up to look like the race they were supposed to play.

Particularly, South Asian identities have lacked media representation until very recently. For sake of specificity, this thesis will solely look at Indian American representations, for two reasons. First, there seems to be an uprising of Indian American individuals incorporating
themselves within the media industry. Mindy Kaling, Priyanka Chopra, Kunal Nayyar, Rahul Khanna, and Aziz Ansari are just a number of actors in main roles on popular television shows, with many others as more minor characters. While this does not mean there are other actors from different South Asian countries, such as Pakistani Kumail Nanjiani, there seems to be a greater prevalence of Indian American actors in this moment. Also, the television shows that these Indian American actors star in are more accessible than many other shows with other South Asian identities within them.

While the history of South Asian representation can be, in many ways, contributed to the continuing immigration and legal struggles between the United States and Indians in the mid 20th century, this history will not be elaborated on further within this thesis. For the sake of pages, and a clearer more focused view on representation, this history will be not be elaborated. For further reading, see the article by Rahman and Paik.

**Important Concepts: Model Minority and Diaspora**

Before going any further, several important terms that surround Indian American identities must be defined. The term model minority was first coined to categorize the insurgence of East Asians American identities living in the United States within the 1960’s (Thakore 153). Now, this term has expanded to encompass all Asian American identities. Lisa Lowe, author of the book *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics*, explains how “the “model minority” myth that constructs Asians as the most successfully assimilated minority group is a contemporary version of this homogenization of Asians” (68). There are two important facets within this definition. The model minority stereotype perpetuates Asian Americans as successfully assimilated, creating an ambiguity of whiteness surrounding their cultural and ethnic heritage. Further, this myth creates oneness within Asian American identities, undermining the
different countries Asian Americans can come from, as well as the different intersectional aspects (class, gender, education, age) that these individuals have. Many media representations of Asian Americans, and South Asian Americans in particular, use this model minority myth within their characters.

The idea of diaspora is another important aspect that will come to play within this discussion of South Asian American representation. Diaspora began as a term with religious associations, originally referring to the exile of Jewish individuals from Egypt during Biblical times (Knott and McLoughlin 9). Starting in the 1960’s, it grew broader, explained as “groups with experiences of large-scale scattering due to homeland trauma” (Knott and McLoughlin 9). Specifically this term has connections to the uprooted black enslaved, as coined by Stuart Hall (Knott and McLoughlin 9). Now, as diaspora studies become an integral aspect of understanding multicultural connections, the term has become even broader. As there have been many people groups throughout history and present day that have been forced to disperse from their homelands, this term has been able to focus on the intersection of race and movement. Now, the term “encompasses those groups hitherto identified as immigrants, ethnic minorities, exiles, expatriates, refugees, guest workers and so on” (Knott and McLoughlin 9). Although present day South Asian individuals do not usually move due to bad conditions in their homeland, diaspora relates to the theme of movement and travel that is prominent within these identities. As Indians move from India to America, they are undergoing one kind of diasporic movement.

**History of Indian American Media Representation**

A brief history of South Asian American’s representation in U.S. movies is important in demonstrating the racially problematic nature that many of these media sources perpetuate. One of the first instances of Indian American representation within U.S. media was Peter Seller’s
character Harundi V. Bakshi in the 1968 movie *The Party*. Although there had been several previous understated South Asian characters within American movies, this portrayal marked the beginning of the first Americanization of South Asian characters. Shilpa Dave writes in his book *Indian Accents: Brown Voice and Racial Performance in American Television and Film* that Seller’s character exemplifies “the transition from prior British colonial-native narratives to American model-minority narratives and a transition from British understandings of South Asians to American interpretations of South Asians” (20). As Sellers played this character, South Asian identities were removed from British colonial rule narratives and worked into an American comedic stereotype. Further, these identities were no longer subject to a British colonialist regime, but instead translated into an American dream--esque example of the model minority. This transition is quite literally happening within *The Party*, where at the beginning of the movie, Bakshi, a small time Indian actor, is dressed as an Indian man fighting for the British army (Dave 22). This scene is quickly disrupted when the camera pans out, revealing Bakshi actually on set for a movie. Here, the movie depicts, and more generally represents, *The Party* as a movement away from seeing Indian Americans as British subjects, and towards an Americanization of these identities.

Not only did this movie have an instance of a white actor wearing brown face makeup, but it also satirized the Indian American identity. Within the film, Bakshi receives an invitation to a Hollywood party. Having no real familiarity with American film culture, and just American culture in general, Bakshi bumbles around this party, ultimately making a fool out of himself. This lack of knowledge surrounding the party causes Bakshi to be the point of humor, as the movie “departs him as an object to be commented on and responded to for comic effect rather than an individual with his own story (Dave 21). Objectification of South Asian identities,
especially for use in comedy, is one characteristic prevalent in many earlier media representations. Indian American identity is further ostracized when Sellers performed as Bakshi using a high pitched accented voice, choppy language, and an always-smiling face (Dave 30). The way Bakshi is played within *The Party* has influenced many other stereotypical portrayals of Indian Americans.

![Peter Seller’s character Harundi Bakshi (Dave 22)](image)

After a lack of films containing Indian characters, the 1980’s saw their reprisal. Movies such as *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* and *Octopussy*, while they did not depict Indian American characters, were both set in India, and contained Indian characters (Dave 32). Unfortunately, both movies suggested that Indian individuals were either cannibalistic tribesmen, or that they were expendable. The trope of Indians as masters of science and tech fields also appeared during this time in science fiction movies, as well as the well-known comedy *Short Circuit* (Dave 34).
Within the 1990’s, The Simpsons popular character Apu really pushed Indian American identities to a wide American audience. Based on Peter Steller’s interpretation of Bakshi, Apu has the stereotypical Indian accent, although voiced by Greek American voice actor Hank Azaria. The use of a racial voice connotes “both foreignness and familiarity because the accent is identified with an English-speaking identity and hence offers some cultural privileges of assimilating into American culture” (Dave 41). The trope of a single “brown voice” works to push all South Asian identities into one category. Pakistani, Indian, and other South Asian peoples are all lumped together, epitomized in American culture by this accent. As Dave explains, it has become a way Americans can understand South Asian identities. There is also an interesting idea coming into play with his latter part of the quote. Since this accent has become so recognizable, it allows South Asian identities assimilation into U.S. culture, at least in the minds of white Americans.

Also important is the career and family Apu is given in the show. Working at a convenience store, Apu represents a sort of American dream that is continually expected of
Indian American narratives. Being the only Indian American character (and one of the only racial minorities) in the entire show, Apu “emerges as a highly politicized representation of a Hindu from India who fulfills and also complicates the “model minority” stereotype of success through tolerance and hard work” (Dave 53). While it seems that Apu satisfies the trope of the model minority rather than subverting it, Dave is clear that Apu’s narrative of immigration, education, and later settling down in America enforces this stereotype. Especially as Apu gets married, and soon has eight children, his characterization works to foreground Indian American identity. Given that his character is voice by a white man, it is clear that *The Simpsons* is perpetuating the idea that white America creates the limits of success Indian Americans can fulfill. Further, the use of this model minority trope in the interpretation of Indian American characters is very often intentional by those creating these images. Since many people “were more likely to run into South Asians who were behind the counter of a local convenience story or driving their cab in an urban city”, these are the narratives surrounding Indian American identity that continue being told (Thakore 152). Unfortunately, this model minority stereotype causes people to assume that South Asians lack any sort of racial discrimination due to their heightened minority status (Thakore 153). By societally passing as “honorary whites”, actual discriminatory practices, including how they are represented in the media, goes unseen (Thakore 151). The history of Indian American representation, and an understanding of the Indian American stereotypes that has pervaded media, is important for understanding how Indian Americans represent themselves.

“*Indians on T.V.*”

*Master of None* has a specific episode that deals with the discrimination that South Asians have faced within media. Season 4 episode 1 titled “Indians on T.V.”, focuses on the
stereotypes that Indian Americans face within their representation on television, and then subverts them. The episode begins with a montage of popular Indian American characters on television, most notably scenes from *Short Circuit*, and several clips of Apu from the *Simpsons*. As discussed prior, these are the depictions that have pervaded the dominant discourse surrounding South Asian identities. By starting the episode with this montage, there is a clear distinction that sets apart *Master of None* from other programs. While many films and television shows have cast Indian Americans as characters, Nev, played by Ansari, both deals with the issues that Indian Americans face in the U.S., while not falling stereotype to brown face, or the horrible stereotyped accent.

This episode further implicates modern television in the stereotyping of Indian Americans, as Nev struggles to find a part that realistically represents who he is as an Indian American. As he walks into the casting call for the part of an Indian cab driver, Nev is just one of the sea of Indian men waiting for their turn (2:04). Ansari is using this image to demonstrate that Indian Americans are often perceived in this way, both by media as well as the general population. Indian Americans seem to be almost a forgotten minority, their individual identities blurred together through a lens of othering. This idea is further enforced when Dev learns he is auditioning for the part of “unnamed cab driver”, and that he will be expected to do an “Indian” accent (3:25). While this character would have a speaking part in the show, they are purposefully left unnamed. Again, Indian Americans are forcefully being neglected by television, where they are not even given names or individual attributes. Although they have some representation within television, these parts are stereotyped, both through the common careers they are given (convenience store owner, cab driver, engineer, etc.), as well as the dreaded brown voice.
Finally, Dev auditions for a television show named “Three Dudes”, the story of three men living in an apartment together, and the adventures they get into. To his excitement, the producers do not force him to speak with an accent, and the part casts Indian Americans as just regular people. However, Dev learns that the producers are between him and his other Indian American friend Ravi. Through a chain of miss-sent emails, they learn that there “can’t be two Indian guys” (8:38). Later, Dev asks the producer why television has constraints on the number of a certain minority there is in a certain show. He explains that Dev and Ravi should not star in the show together because it “won’t be relatable to a mainstream audience” (17:41). Ansari is demonstrating how oftentimes television and movies represent certain minorities to fill some sort of a quota. While having one Indian American seems contemporary and fresh, two on the screen together are taken as a sort of threat to white mainstream media. Also, Indian Americans on television often just stay on the sidelines, as the cab driver or convenience store owner parts seem to encourage. Dev explains that Indian Americans tend to just be “set decorations” for the narrative being portrayed (19:41). When television continually represents these people in a comedic, synecdochical way, these misunderstandings of Indian Americans permeate outwardly to society as a whole. This stereotyping and othering in television has consequences outside of the screen.

While Ansari’s show creates a discourse about Indian Americans on television, Master of None subverts the very issues it brings up, especially in this episode. Ansari proves that a television show can have more than one main Indian character, and still be relatable to the consumer. Master of None’s characters, no matter their race or cultural heritage, speak in a way that is contextually important, attempting and largely succeeding to avoid stereotypes. Also, all the characters have a depth to them, and continually change and grow throughout the show’s two
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seasons. It seems that *Master of None* tries to subvert the expectation that there can only be one Indian American character. Other television shows, largely written by white males, distort the interpretation of Indian Americans. Perhaps the greatest aspect of *Master of None* is that it gives an Indian American a place to bring up these issues, and represent themselves outside of the false representations created by white Americans. Through this media, Ansari is given the ability to characterize himself, and his culture, the way he thinks it should be interpreted.

**Ansari and Lahiri: Two Voices, Different Genres**

As American media has defined and stereotyped the Indian American identity, artists such as Ansari and Lahiri have created their own cultural mediums to define how they see themselves. While neither of their texts are a full picture of any or all Indian American identities, it is important to analyze what they do say this experience entails. Ansari is a second generation Indian American, and is known as a comedian, and one of the writers, directors, and cast members of the popular Netflix show *Master of None*. Lahiri, a writer, has written several novels and collections of short stories. Her first collection, *Interpreter of Maladies*, was the original inspiration for the thesis; this project will look at the collection *Unaccustomed Earth*. The latter is her newest installment of short stories, and an analysis surrounding present-day Indian American representation calls for the newest material. Although Lahiri is an Indian American author, she has in the last few years lived in Italy, writing in Italian and embracing Italian culture and their way of life. Culturally, they are from very different media spheres, and work in very different spaces.

Although Ansari and Lahiri write different genres, they are actually quite similar in comparison. Television episodes work in very limited, segmented ways. Although *Master of None* does have an elongated story line, each episode is rather self-contained. Within one episode
is a narrative arc, with specific characters, and one overall message. Short stories also work the same way. The collection has several overarching themes and messages. Although many of the stories do not have a repeat in their characters, many are similar karyotypes, and the latter third of *Unaccustomed Earth* even looks at the same family. By analyzing television episodes and short stories, there can be more specificity than there would be by looking at the larger collections individually.

As a point of difference, *Master of None* and *Unaccustomed Earth* reach to different audiences. Since Netflix is widely accessible to the general population, either through paying for a subscription, or borrowing someone else’s, Ansari’s show is able to reach out to a wide range of people. As many Netflix originals are written and produced in part to be successful and create income, his show is even more likely to garner an audience. Ansari’s show is an example of traditionally viewed “low culture”. Despite the fact that the show wrestles with many challenging issues such as race, gender, and family dynamics, it is catered and written to be understandable by a large audience. On the contrary, Lahiri’s writing more generally is an example of “high culture”. She is a very popular author, but only well read, or scholarly masses, usually look into her writing. Where Ansari’s television show is an element of oral, lingual, and visual culture, Lahiri is strictly communicating through written word. However, these points of difference seem to garner more support for analyzing these two texts together, than it does to deny their compatibility. By looking at both Ansari and Lahiri, both low and high culture, and oral and written communication is being integrated and synthesized. Lastly, it must be noted that Ansari gender identifies as male, while Lahiri identifies as female. By looking at the ways they represent themselves, a comparison of these two texts is also spanning gender.
The aim of this thesis is to analyze the primary points of similarity and difference between Ansari’s *Master of None* and Lahiri’s *Unaccustomed Earth* in order to examine how these popular Indian American influencers represent themselves, their communities, and a broad sense of an Indian American identity. The themes of generational relationships and travel are both important to these texts.

**Aziz Ansari’s *Master of None***

Before specific episodes can be analyzed, the title of the show itself seems crucial to an understanding of South Asian representation, and more precisely, Ansari’s purpose in producing this show. *Master of None* makes a connection to the Renaissance saying “Jack of all trades, master of none”. This phrase is a common colloquialism in the English language, used to explain a man who had mediocre talent in all areas, but did not excel at anything. There could be several reasons that Ansari used this phrase to title his show. By rooting *Master of None* in the historical context of the Renaissance, Ansari is gaining validity or credibility. In an effort to gain credibility, the only way to prove his show has some merit is to connect it with a phrase familiar to the viewers, and historically important. As the canon of Western literature is traditionally focused on white men in the Renaissance, by using this phrase, Ansari is increasing his credibility, and subverting traditional expectations of literature. In this case, Ansari could only claim his own representation through the acceptance of a previous historic time. The show may also be titled *Master of None* to demonstrate Ansari’s understanding of himself, or his character Dev. The phrase implies transient sense of being; of continually trying new hobbies, and even traveling to find oneself. The episodes of *Master of None* do follow this suggestion of a transient
identity, both through Dev’s struggle as an actor, as well as his need for travel in the beginning of the second season. It seems that Indian American life hinges on this liminality, and fluid sense of being. As it will be demonstrated in later parts of the thesis, texts involving Indian Americans constantly involve this transience and movement. Lastly, by using this identification, Ansari is increasing how others can relate to his character, in both the context of the show and in Ansari’s real life. Through this identifier, Ansari is connecting to Master of None’s mostly white audience, who perhaps feel like they are also a “master of none”. The show, in its realistic portrayal of Ansari, works to make Indian Americans more relatable, casting them as real people with real experiences.

“Parents”

The literal movement of peoples from India to the U.S. is the starting point of Indian American representation. This double consciousness, in terms of national identity, creates the distinctive aspects of being an Indian American. The generations that stem from immigrant parents can also differ in this identity, as a greater assimilation to Western culture, and a greater connection with the U.S. as home, establishes a disconnect among families. Within the second episode of Mater of None, entitled “Parents”, Dev and Brian attempt to understand their parents better by learning more about their immigration experience and home lives. Throughout the episode, Dev and Brian go from a mindset of utter annoyance over the quirks their families have, to appreciation of the sacrifices they have made. The analysis below will only look at Dev and his relationship with his parents, since the focus is on Indian American depiction. By analyzing the generational impacts of the immigration experience, and the way these narratives are structured, the representation of Indian Americans can further understood.
This episode begins with Dev at his parent’s home, as his father asks him to fix the calendar on his iPad. Instead of taking the time to help his father, Dev instead becomes annoyed by this request, asking “can I just do it later”, and complaining that he much watch the trailers to the X-Man movie he and Brian are planning on seeing (2:38). Here, there is a definite bridge between the first and second generation Americans. The malfunctioning iPad is representative of the relationship between Dev and Ramesh. Since an iPad is a newer form of technology, Dev, in a way, stands for this device. While there is something wrong and malfunctioning, this requires hard work and forethought they are not ready to give the problem. In some ways, Ramesh and Dev are only starting to get ready to discover what it means to truly understand one another.

Also, Ramesh’s inability to control his technology could stand for his inability to control Dev. If technology is standing for the younger generations, then this scene indicates that Ramesh has lost the ability to parent his son, and connect with him in a meaningful way. Later in the episode, Dev complains that his parents lack in giving him the emotional support he needs (10:01). Again, there is an obvious disconnect between Dev and his family. Due to their vastly different upbringings and life experience, they are unable at this point to truly understand each other.

There also seems to be some implication that assimilation into American society has made it a greater challenge for Dev to relate with his parents. Within sociology, segmented assimilation refers to the gap in Americanization that occurs between first and second-generation immigrants (Thakore 150). This idea of segmented assimilation seems to be at play in the relationship between Dev and Ramesh. The show suggests that since he was raised in America, there is too great of a difference in upbringing for his family to truly communicate and accept each other. Discussing the generational gaps that occur from the immigrant experience not only focuses on the differences that occur between Indian American families, but also looks at the
way American culture has separated these people. Perhaps the way homeland plays into identity, and the very transient nature of immigration, makes it impossible for the different generations within Indian American families to understand each other.

In this episode, there is also a focus on the different opportunities that Dev has received, that his parents could only wish they had. Ramesh worked in a zipper factory until he could afford medical school within the U.S. (3:44). There is a very real contrast to the life Dev lives, compared to the hard work and extreme discrimination his parents had to endure for him to be in his socioeconomic position. Not only did Ramesh deny his parent’s desire of him to continue the life manual labor that was common for his family, but he also had to work incredibly hard to make the life he created for himself. In juxtaposition, it is explained that Dev chose to be an actor not because of some natural affinity for acting, or a passion for it, but because the director of a yogurt commercial noticed him in the mall, and thereby began his acting career. While Ramesh chose a career for himself that would not only better his life, but also the health and wellbeing of others, there is some suggestion that Dev just randomly decided his career path. Thus, there is a difference between the opportunities that Ramesh was given, and those he had to create for himself. In contrast, Dev was given his career path by someone else, thereby indicting how his life is much easier since he was born and raised in America. Here is another point at which Dev and his family differs in their background, and perhaps this is another reason that the family has a difficult time communicating with each other.

Within “Parents”, the function and expectations that come with an immigrant narrative are discussed. For the first time, this episode depicts Ramesh’s childhood, and what it looked like growing up in India. Throughout the entire show, there is a discussion about how immigrant narratives are supposed to be exciting and emotionally impactful. While people may expect a
story of hardship and struggle, in some instances, this is not the case. All the flashbacks have a sepia-like quality to them, muting the vivid colors into a more brown hue (3:21). These flashbacks, particularly involving Ramesh’s upbringing, have an old-movie sort of feel. This could suggest that people hearing this story expect it to function in a certain way, and have similar characteristics to what they expect from immigrant narratives. To others, perhaps Ramesh’s life story is supposed to be like a movie, where the struggling protagonist finally gets a break when he moves to America. Brian and Dev also discuss this idea while walking on the street together. They explain how oftentimes it is forgotten that immigrants are all different people, and that one formulaic narrative does not give their stories justice (13:40). Interestingly, both Brian and Dev later in the episode place similar expectations onto their parent’s stories while they are all sitting at dinner (18:47). Master of None’s plot subverts this blurring of individual immigrant narratives, and the expectations that are placed on these stories. Since the show only focuses on two protagonists, and their families, there is a very focused view on two instances of Asian American immigration. Also, Master of None focuses on the daily lives of the characters, disregarding traditional immigrant narratives that focus on the climatic struggles of these people. This discounting of conventional narrative form allows the show to not only depict South Asian Americans as regular people, but also that they can be involved in a variety of activities and interests.

This episode, like a majority of them in the season, works to familiarize a U.S audience with actual Indian Americans. For example, it is made clear that Ramesh and his wife were part of an arranged marriage, and knew each other for less than a week before moving to the U.S. together (20:03). This important for Master of None to note, as many white Western viewers are most likely uncomfortable with the idea of arranged marriages. Although this is a small instance
within the overarching themes of the episode, it reflects the show’s overall purpose, which is to familiarize an unacquainted audience with Indian Americans, and their daily lives.

In conclusion, “Parents” demonstrates the difficulties that occur between generational gaps, especially in regards to immigrant families. Although there is a clear depiction of these struggles, by the end of the episode, Dev is finally able to relate to his parents, and understand them. Perhaps this stems from his eventual acceptance of their personal immigrant stories, and not one that blurs their individuality.

“The Thief”

At the start of the second season, Dev has travelled to Italy, and is temporarily away from New York, and his ex Rachel. The entire season is differentiated from its predecessor as a different focus, and narrative plot line, to Dev’s New York life. While the second season garnered mixed reviews from critics and viewers alike, the themes and problems incorporated into the episodes extend the narrative focus from that of the first season. As Sonia Saraiya, a writer at Variety explains “Dev approaches the world with such continued wide-eyed wonder — examining, this season, love and culture and religion and community with the same blank-slate curiosity” as in the already established episodes. By describing Dev as curious to his environment in this new season, the theme of travel and liminal identity can be seen in the narrative. While the first season mainly focuses on race within a heteronormative U.S. cultural system, the second broadens the scope of its focus to Italy, where Dev is learning to make pasta. This is exemplified by the change in imagery and narrative at the beginning of the season.

Season 2 episode 1 titled “The Thief” opens to the image of swaying church bells, and the harmonious sounds they create. This is the first image that the viewer has of Italy. These bells evoke the image of traditional Italian movies, which is further heightened by the black and
white imagery throughout the entire episode. Not only does this connect *Master of None* with a sort of homely antiquity, but it also differentiates this episode from the rest of the series. Although this episode is part of *Master of None*’s larger narrative, the episode very much sets apart this new season.

The Streets of Italy (6:45)

The entire first season is set in New York, with colorful scenery and people. The open brick streets, romantic living spaces, and café-style restaurants in Italy are an extreme juxtaposition to the clustered, oftentimes dirty living that is commonplace in New York. While the New York streets have a plethora of activity, the streets in Italy are open and free. There is a greater communal atmosphere in Italy, with the town people being open and inviting. Again, this creates a stark contrast to the New York environment he has been living in. Many viewers felt that this sudden shift to Italy from the typical New York setting was jolting, and perhaps an unimportant aspect of the plotline. However, this travel away from New York, and to the wide, village landscape of Italy, heightens the theme of travel that has been important in the discussion
of Indian American identity. Dev moving to Italy is just one example of the movement and travel he experiences in the series.

The constant travel and movement of Dev in Modena mimics the transient spatial realities of Indian Americans. As a character, he is constantly moving, not only represented in his travel to Italy, but also the way he moves within different communities in New York. International travel seems to be a common trope within Indian American representations. Within Lahiri’s *Unaccustomed Earth*, there are several characters that continually travel internationally. Even Lahiri herself has moved to Italy, and is writing novels in Italian. Thus, there seems to be a particular aspect of Indian American experiences, or perhaps just the immigrant experience in general, that suggests constant movement. Interestingly, Dev builds his own community while living in Italy. He spends time at the host family’s restaurant, particularly close to a little boy and his grandmother (4:36). This makeshift family is representative of the liminality of travel. Although Dev is close with these people in Italy, the connections with the family deteriorate once he returns back to New York. The friends Dev makes while in Italy, in particular Francesca, are also in part a transient aspect of Dev’s travels. Although these people do reoccur in later plot aspects of season 2, they are transient characters. Despite much of the season 2 plot being reliant on Dev’s attraction and time spent with Francesca, they eventually realize this connection is not successful, and part ways. The other characters also eventually move out of the *Master of None* narrative. In other words, these individuals really only play a part in the show to enhance the drama of the plot; they are lacking emotional and representative depth. This also enhances the transient nature of the plot, and Dev’s existence throughout the series.

Within *Master of None* Season 1, Dev has several groups of friends consisting of different racial identities. Particularly, Dev has two communities of people that he is close to.
The first is other Indian American men, in particular Ravi, who is another aspiring actor. Dev also associates with Arnold, a heterosexual man, Brian, an Asian American, and Denise, his African American lesbian friend. These individuals are of all different ethnicities and sexualities, demonstrating the wide range of people to which he is included. Thus, even in New York, Dev travels around different communities and people. He does not stop himself at one specific group, but instead acts as a passing character throughout different groups in New York. Just as the immigrant experience is defined at one of constant movement and settling, so is Dev’s experience within the show. He moves and wanders freely around the city.

Transitioning from Ansari to Lahiri

Just as Ansari depicts generational connections and the importance of travel within South Asian identities, so too does Lahiri. While these two authors in a textual perspective are fit to be compared and utilized together, the authors themselves are also in discourse with each other. Within an article by the LA times, the interviewer follows Ansari around town and discusses the second season of Master of None. Here, Ansari picks up a Lahiri book and says:
She’s going to see articles about me and *Master of None* saying, like, “Oh, he learned Italian’, and be like, ‘Fuck you! I wrote a book in Italian! (Yuan)

Although they are not in a scholarly discourse with one another, it is clear that at the least, Ansari is familiar with who Lahiri is, and the work she has done within the Indian American community. Since both authors have connections to Italy, they are tied together in a more personal way.

**Lahiri’s Unaccustomed Earth**

Lahiri’s short story titled “Unaccustomed Earth”, for which the entire collection is named, depicts a father and daughter emotionally detached from each other. Since the death of her mother, Ruma has been separated emotionally and physically from her father, as he has been traveling Europe. Unbeknownst to Ruma, her father has taken on a female travel partner with whom he has an intimate, yet not romantic, relationship. Ruma, who now has a husband and child of her own, must learn to understand her father, and the ways he fits into her life. After a visit of some awkwardness, but also of redemption and understanding, Ruma’s father, who will be called Baba for the rest of the thesis, decided to return traveling once again. Just like *Master of None* focuses on the themes of generational conflicts and travel within the context of Indian American identity, so too does “Unaccustomed Earth”.

**Why does Lahiri Title her Collection Unaccustomed Earth?**

Looking at the title of Lahiri’s text is important in understanding her overall message in the collection. *Unaccustomed Earth* begins with a short quote from a Nathaniel Hawthorne story that reads:
Human nature will not flourish, any more than a potato, if it be planted and replanted, for too long a series of generations, in the same worn-out soil. My children have had other birthplaces, and, so far as their fortunes may be within my control, shall strike their roots into unaccustomed earth (1).

This quote is comparing the success and flourishing of human development to the success of farmland. If produce is continually planted within the same soil, the nutrients will be worn out, and the crop will not multiply. This quote suggests that people are the same way. If human nature is continually “planted and replanted” on the same ground, development will not occur. Thus, the solution to this problem is to “strike their roots into unaccustomed earth”. The diction choice of “birthplace” and “unaccustomed” connects the planting metaphor to the suggestion that people should spread out and develop their familial roots in places to which they are unaccustomed. Having this title for a short story collection regarding Indian Americans is fitting. People emigrating from India to America are creating lives within new soil. Although these people may be unaccustomed to the culture and language of America at first, there is a connotation that eventually these people will become accustomed and to a degree assimilated. By having this quote at the start of the collection, Lahiri is suggesting that eventually changing location is integral to having healthy and successful families. While this is not to say that people who live in India their entire lives are missing out in some way, this excerpt does explain that a change in soil can create stronger, more fertile communities.

Within the actual short story titled “Unaccustomed Earth”, there are several ways that the characters are traversing new spaces/soil. Since Ruma and her family are Indian Americans, they are living on previously unaccustomed earth. Further, Ruma and her father are on new soil as they rebuild their relationship and try to understand one another. Travel is an important within
the story, as Ruma and her father have just undergone, or are currently undergoing, travel to different parts of the world. Through this travel, they are continually planting their feet into unaccustomed earth. Also, in a very literal way, the metaphor of planting is found within the story, as Ruma’s father begins to plant a garden during his visit with his daughter. This theme of planting in new soil continually comes into play within the story, especially within travel and generational connections.

**Travel and the Indian American Experience**

Travel, within India, Europe, and the U.S., is a staple of Indian American identity within the text. As was already explained above, Ruma’s father has been in a perpetual state of travel throughout the last several years, and is now traveling to see his daughter and grandson. While the effects that travel and constant movement have on identity will be analyzed in the next section, there is an interesting comparison at play within the story regarding travel to India with travel throughout Europe and the U.S.

As he journeys to see his daughter, Baba realizes how light he feels, compared to the last time he traveled across the continental United States. He now realized “How freeing it was, these days, to travel alone, with only a single suitcase to check” (7). This experience is contrasted with the time Baba traveled with his wife and two children to Calcutta, where they had:

…four seats, he remembered, among the smokers at the back of the plane. None of them had the energy to visit any sites in Bankok during their layover, sleeping instead in the hotel provided by the airline (7-8).

While Baba feels light and “free”, the trip he remembers connotes a feeling of suppression and constriction. The image of the thick smoke, and the implied claustrophobia that comes from sitting on the back of an aircraft, stands for the entire trip to Calcutta as a whole. During this
flight, there is an obvious energy to Baba. However, the family trip to Calcutta is described to cause the family to be drowsy, and miss out on any sight seeing opportunities. Through these quotes, it appears that Baba is distancing himself from his immediate family, and more distant family members in Calcutta. It does make sense for an international flight to feel long and tedious, but there is no joy that Baba gets from even remembering this family experience. The comparison between these two flights suggests not only a desire to move away from family life, but also nationalistic ties as well. Instead of looking at back at the last time Baba saw his home country as being an incredibly rewarding experience, he instead looks back with disdain.

“Unaccustomed Earth” seems to suggest that travel, especially within the U.S. and Europe, has become an escapist practice for Baba.

Even when Ruma finally asks her father to move in with her at the end of the story, Baba finds that he can no longer commit to the ties of his family. Although he feels that emotionally he wants to accept Ruma’s offer to live with her, there is a desire to no longer get involved in “another family, part of the mess, the feuds, the demands, the energy of it” (53). Again, family is being connected to a loss of energy, an almost drowsy existence. Baba has enjoyed his stay with his daughter, but can no longer give himself away to the ebb and flow of family dynamics. He decided to return back to Prague, continuing a life of travel and movement once again (55). It seems that this lifestyle is the only one Baba is still able to live; travel has become a mechanism of freedom, but also distance.

The Deficit of Identity Through Movement and Transition

Identity explained through deficit is a theme continually seen in the characterization of Baba. Ruma views her father not for who he is, but rather who he is not. Thus, his identity is portrayed through negation. This depiction of his identity is at first explained as a direct
consequence of his travels. Spatially, he is not present in Ruma’s life. His wandering in Europe quite literally places a separation of space within their relationship. “When he was away Ruma did not hear from him”, causing an even greater separation in their relationship (3). Not only is there a spatial distance of land and water separating them, but also the lack of verbal communication indicates the distance they have in their relationship. On occasion, her father would send her postcards from the places he visited. However, these forms of written communication seemed lacking, and unemotional; the tourist-based pictures on the front of the cards seem to represent a detachment between Ruma and her father. These cards are explained as “impersonal accounts” of what her father has done on his travels; due to the shortness of his trips, they are a “one-sided correspondence” (4). The diction choices of impersonal and one-sided again affirm the idea that there is a distance and detachment between these two characters. Even attempts at connection, the writing of these postcards, results in even more disconnect. In some sense, Ruma’s father is described as if he does not exist at all. For example, Ruma finds that when she looks at the postcards, there is “never a sense of her father in these places” (4). This traveling and movement that Ruma’s father partakes in seems to foster a liminality or transience to his identity. While he is traveling, his identity and personhood seems to not exist to Ruma. This motif is also demonstrated within the Italy plotline within Master of None; the overlaps between the two texts will be discussed later.

Further, Baba has an identity that directly diverges from that of his deceased wife. Every personality trait and quality of Ruma’s mother withholds seems to directly contrast to Baba’s. For example, while her mother is described to write in a “jumble of capital and lowercase, as though she’d learned to only make one version of each letter”, Baba’s writing was “small, precise, and slightly feminine” (4). Comparing their handwriting seems to manipulate gendered
implications. Although most women are stereotypically described at having dainty, clean writing, this is actually how Baba’s writing looks. Thus, Baba is compared as a womanly, introverted character, while the mother is explained to be more outspoken and present. Perhaps this characterization distorts these gender expectations in order to in some way explain why Baba is so separate and disconnected from his daughter. This effeminate description of Baba appears again when the speaker discusses the reasons he does not live with his daughter. Although her husband continually suggested Baba live with them, “Ruma feared he would become a responsibility, an added demand” (7). Thus, Baba is also defined as weak and needy. Again, these are traditionally feminized qualities, so different than the strong-will of Ruma’s mother. When Ruma shows her father around her new house, she is upset at how quiet Baba is about the whole experience; while her mother would “have been more forthcoming, remarking about the view, wondering if ivory curtains would look better than green”, he just looks around, not verbally communicating with her at all (14). Not only does this scene further demonstrate how separated Ruma and her father have become, it also identifies another way Baba is unlike his wife. Just as Baba’s traveling causes his identity to be ephemeral, the personality traits he is missing also shape his identity in this way. Baba’s identity is explained as a deficit, especially when compared to his wife.

Lastly, it should be noted that Ruma’s father is never named throughout the course of the story. Naming is an incredibly important aspect of identity formation. Not only is it a way for social/peer identification, but it also allows for an individual to autonomously identify themselves. While Ruma’s father is called Baba or Dadu, Bengali for father and grandfather respectively, his given name is never addressed. Thus, Lahiri is connecting his identity with his
familial role, minimizing and calling into question his personhood. Again, Baba is represented through lack, and what he is not.

The theme of traveling and transition is also present in the depiction of Ruma as well. At the start of the story, Ruma and her husband have moved from their small home in New York, to Seattle. Within the text, Ruma’s identity is connected and arguably represented by this new home. Although Ruma had been a lawyer in New York, and still worked after she gave birth to Akash, once her mother unexpectedly passed on, she found herself unable to continue her job at the firm (5). However, this all worked out for the family as:

…then, miraculously, Adam’s new job came through, with a salary generous enough for her to give notice. It was the house that was her work now: leafing through the piles of catalogues that came in the mail, marking them with Post-its, ordering sheets covered with dragons for Akash’s room (6).

Since moving to Seattle, Ruma’s job is to take care of her son, and watch over their large house. The house is described as Ruma’s work now, providing singularity to her identity. While before she was a working woman, with a husband, a child, and a home to look after, her person has been minimized to this single act. The word “leafing” implies a never-ending cycle of these pages she looks at, a constant routine of domesticity and housework. Ruma is trapped in these stereotypes and expectations that exist for her as a housewife. Also, the very word leafing perpetuates a sort of naturalness to this activity; one that it does not seem Ruma has. In fact, she has begun losing her hair in various clumps, finding “clumps on her pillow each night” (12). Even though this current way of life is not suiting her, she continues to be sucked into this lifestyle anyway. The second sentence of the block quote lists these activities in order, reaffirming the idea of cyclical domesticity. Although Ruma was involved in a law firm, she is
now ordering her son dragon sheets. The activities in her life have been reduced to buying dragon sheets. Although these acts of domesticity and caring for one’s family are not negative in and of themselves, it is obvious Ruma is unhappy with how her life has changed. Ruma’s identity is described similar to her father’s, with a minimization and deficit of being. The act of traveling, and the transition of space as well as familial structure, is causing this limitation, and transition state, of her identity.

**Generational Connections and the (Grand) father**

Although at the beginning of the story Ruma has difficulty disciplining Akash, her father is able to become a sort of parental figure for this young child, connecting him with his Bengali heritage. Ruma describes the disparity between how she felt about her son while he was in the womb, compared to how she sees him now. Despite her love for her son, “the body she’d nurtured inside of her” was “utterly alien, hostile” (10). This comparison between the warmth and protection of the womb compared to the coldness she now finds in her son is incredibly telling. Not only has Ruma disconnected herself from her father, but the very being she has brought into the world repulses her. Not only does Ruma perceive Akash in this way, but she also is unable to control his behavior. When she asks him to turn off the television to see his grandfather, Akash refuses to abide (10). She senses that despite his young age, “she already felt the resistance, the profound barrier she assumed would set in with adolescence” (10). Even at this point in his life, she feels incredibly disconnected, and even slightly bitter towards her son. The use of the words “resistance” and “barrier” suggest that this struggle is insurmountable, and will continue to get worse with time. Lastly, Ruma is very aware that she has stopped teaching Akash details and the language of his culture. Although Ruma once grew up knowing Bengali, she gave up teaching it to Akash when “after he started speaking in full sentences English had
taken over, and she lacked the discipline to stick to Bengali” (12). Ruma has lost the resilience to teach Akash their language. Thus, she is disconnecting him from his heritage and history. Not only does Ruma feel detached from her son, but she has given up teaching him about their cultural language.

Within the story, Akash’s father, Adam, is really only mentioned. Since he is currently the breadwinner for the family, his work has caused him “yet to spend two consecutive weeks at home” (5). Akash therefore only has Ruma to take care of him, a task she is unable to conquer alone. When Ruma’s father comes to visit them, he in a way becomes a makeshift father figure for Akash. Even when Baba first walks into their home, Akash suddenly behaves in ways Ruma could have only dreamed. Baba asks Akash to get off the bed, and to Ruma’s surprise, “he slithered onto the floor, briefly crawling as if he was a baby again (15). Akash melts to Baba’s requests. With this command, Akash is infantilized, becoming naïve and obedient. Baba reconnects Akash to his culture (through teaching him Bengali), and his family, telling Akash about the grandmother he never remembered (45, 49). Baba becomes a father to Akash, not only being able to discipline him, but also connecting him to his heritage. While Ruma has been relatively unsuccessful at parenting him, Baba takes Akash under his wing.

Throughout this analysis of Indian American representation, the conversation surrounding generational connections has been an integral aspect of the South Asian identity. Although the relationships of Dev from *Master of None* and Ruma from “Unaccustomed Earth” with their parents have been looked at, the example between Baba and Akash also reaffirms the importance of connecting generationally. Akash is able to learn from his grandfather, just as his grandfather is able to learn from him as well. Thus, the many familial generations connect and grow with each other; it is not just a dynamic between first and second generation.
Planting and Remembrance

The image of the hydrangea and planting is the one of the most poignant and integral to the narrative. While living in Ruma’s home, Baba decided to create a garden in her backyard. Planting a garden had always been an activity Baba enjoyed, as he used to plant produce his wife liked to cook with as “he had toiled in unfriendly soil, coaxing such things from the ground” (16). The contrasting words of “toiled” and “coaxing” suggest that while planting and growing these plants was challenging, he had a natural affinity for the work. Creating Ruma’s father as a gardener connects to the overall title of this short story and collection. In a way, he is the original planter for the family, bringing them to America where they can live on unaccustomed earth. With this plot point, Lahiri is going full circle, connecting her narrative to the title, and overall theme of the collection.

There is a definitely contrast to the gardening abilities of Baba, to those of Ruma and her husband. Baba does not believe Ruma and Adam will be able to continue the care of the garden when he leaves. Baba pictures the garden “overgrown with weeds, the leaves chewed up by slugs (48). The chaos that would come to the garden when in the care of Ruma is similar to the chaos Akash exhibited before Baba came to town. Although Baba is disconnected from the family, he is able to create a stillness and peace that has been somehow lost. By returning to the act of planting, Baba brings healing and catharsis to the family. This retribution furthered when, eventually, he plants a hydrangea, a flower that represents his deceased wife (51). Perhaps Baba plants this specific flower because he is coming to terms that he cannot replace the wife that he and Ruma lost, but that he can become more of a figure in Ruma and Akash’s life. Also, the image of the hydrangea represents the continual memory of Ruma’s mother, and the family’s past.
However, this moment of forgiveness and understanding is taken away at the end of the story. Ruma finds a postcard that her father had planned to send to his new lover, which Akash stole before Baba could ever mail it out (57). In fact, this postcard has a smudge of gardening soil on it, “dirt that obscured a bit of the zip code” (58). The word “obscured” suggests that Baba’s relationship with his wife is manipulating his relationship with this new woman. Also, this postcard is obscuring this newfound understanding Ruma has of her father. She no longer knows if the connection they have rebuilt is actually real, and she begins to doubt her father’s love for her and her mother. Despite the sudden doubt that the postcard has brought her, she decides to send it anyway (59). While Lahiri ends the story at this point, there are several concluding remarks that can be made. Perhaps Ruma wants the best for her father, and their newfound connection has allowed her want her father just to be happy. It is also a possibility that she send the postcard back out because it disgusted her to see it, and she wanted it out of her home. Although there is no clarity behind why she decided to send the card, Lahiri is perhaps suggesting by this cliffhanger of sorts that these generational relationships are never static, but always in flux and change.

**Conclusion:**

As both Ansari and Lahiri are representing Indian Americans, these are perhaps some of the most accurate and thorough portrayals of this identity found in television and literature. However, they are not completely absolved of critique; they both perpetuate a particular stereotype surrounding Indian Americans in their texts.
The Problem of the Modern Minority in Ansari and Lahiri

As the mythos of the model minority stereotype has plagued Indian American representation within majority owned medias, this trope has also found its way into both Ansari and Lahiri’s characters. Particularly, both of these artists represent South Asian characters with a vast amount of upward mobility, also fulfilling the image of the American dream. Within Master of None, Dev is able to afford living in a large New York penthouse on an actor’s salary. His father, despite the struggles he faced to get to America, and the discrimination towards him while in America, is a successful doctor. While there are plenty of South Asian Americans with successful jobs and high-end living arrangements, they are unfortunately in the minority. Lahiri also creates characters that fall into the model minority trope. Ruma in “Unaccustomed Earth” is able to live in a large mansion in Seattle. Although she did work as a lawyer, in the story she is a stay at home mother, relying on her husband’s income alone to support her family. Again, Ruma’s ability to quit her job and simply rely on her husband’s income is not the position many Indian Americans have.

For example, Italy’s romantic setting within “The Thief” parallels the upper-middle class lifestyle that Dev is used to. Dev chooses to travel in Italy to fulfill his goal of learning to make pasta. Although he works as an actor, with no other source of income, he is able to afford a several month long trip to a foreign country. The lushness of the Italian cityscape is comparable to the lush life Dev maintains within the series. Not only can he afford a luxurious trip, but also he is constantly going out to eat, and spending money within the show. In an early part of the episode, Dev is kneading the dough to form the tortellini, a careful and meticulous job that he ends up not being very successful at (3:49). This pasta making montage demonstrates Dev’s upper-middle class lifestyle; he is paying the travel expenses and losing money from not working
in order to learn how to make correct Italian pasta, a signifier for a lower class duty. As one of the few representations of an Indian American, the class dynamics within *Master of None* are particularly important. Most Indian Americans do not have this wealth and freedom. While *Master of None* is still an important show specifically for its focus on racial stereotypes and expectations, Dev’s class, and the lack of discourse within the show it has, is a particular problematic aspect within the series.

Lahiri’s stories also fall under a similar problem of representation. A majority of her characters within her short stories, and all of them in *Unaccustomed Earth*, are upper middle class and have college degrees. These characters also have relatively successful jobs, or means of income, and established family units. Although this is a demographic that is widely represented within the U.S., this focus on a single Indian American identity reinforces the idea of the model minority. Perhaps this portrayal by both artists is because they, for the most part, fit these characterizations. However, since they are so easily seen by American culture, it is possible that the characters Ansari and Lahiri create do as much harm as they do good for Indian American representation.

**Final Thoughts**

Although South Asian representation was quite seldom within American television and film, the success of *The Simpsons* marked the beginning of a plethora of Indian American characters. These characterizations are encompassed by particular stereotypes, including the “typical” Indian accent and model minority mythos. As American audiences are less comfortable with minority characters being represented in television and movies, Indian Americans have been cast as an “honorary white citizen”, eliminating the comfortableness that comes with
depicting more ‘troubling’ race dynamics in the United States, such as the institutionalized racism towards African Americans, and or post-9/11 anti-Islamic sentiments.

However, several Indian Americans, such as Lahiri and Ansari, are producing content to represent themselves, and their identities as Indian Americans. While Lahiri is more nuanced with her critique surrounding Indian American representation in media, Ansari directly criticizes these issues in the episode titled “Indians on T.V”. Both Lahiri and Ansari use the themes of generational connections, and travel/movement to explain and analyze identity; even though there are problems surrounding their texts, they are important nonetheless. Not only are they working against many stereotypes found in media, but they are also invoking their power by autonomously depicting their identities, and those of their people. Overall, this project is important because South Asian Americans are often erased from Asian American studies, and the representations of them in media are hardly critiqued. The discussion surrounding what representation of different races should look like, and who should be playing these characters, is also important for an overall awareness in media.
Works Consulted

Ansari, Aziz and Alan Yang, directors. *Master of None*, Season 1-2, Netflix.


