BREAKING GENDER & RACIAL STEREOTYPES: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF *NEVER HAVE I EVER*

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By Rebecca Lin

Never Have I Ever has broken racial barriers since its April release. (Photo via Netflix)

INTRODUCTION

Ever since its release last spring, Mindy Kaling's <u>Never Have I Ever</u> has taken the world by storm. The Netflix series has racked up over 40 million views and has garnered <u>widespread praise</u> for <u>breaking South Asian stereotypes</u> and <u>starring a diverse cast.</u> Nevertheless, some critics accuse the show of <u>perpetuating tired tropes</u> and offering a singular narrative of the Indian-American experience. I decided to watch the series myself before weighing in on the conversation.

Storyline

On a superficial level, the show revolves around Indian-American high school student Devi Vishwakumar (Maitreyi Ramakrishnan) who wants to elevate her social status without her friends, family, and feelings thwarting her plans. Devi vows to achieve this goal by losing her virginity to crush Paxton Hall-Yoshida (Darren Barnet), who she believes helped cure her mysterious leg paralysis.

Initially, *Never Have I Ever* seems to recycle clichés. (GIF via Tenor)

However, deeper themes lie behind the series' lighthearted exterior. While Kaling pitches it as a rom-com loosely based on her childhood, the show is more of a coming-of-age story. As Devi pursues Paxton to cope with her father Mohan's (Sendhil Ramamurthy) death, she overcomes struggles with her Indian identity and relationships with her mother Nalini (Poorna Jagannathan), cousin Kamala (Richa Moorjani) best friends Fabiola (Lee Rodriguez) and Eleanor (Ramona Young), and rival Ben Gross (Jaren Lewison).

Characters

Through Devi, Kaling creates a more realistic representation of South Asian experiences. Older dramas depict Indians as grade-centric model minorities who face few challenges, but *Never Have I Ever* does the opposite: Devi is social yet awkward, having to simultaneously navigate

adolescence and grief. Moreover, the series highlights her mental health and therapy sessions, which the Asian community often views as taboo.

Devi visits Dr. Ryan (Niecy Nash) following the psychological trauma of Mohan's death. (Photo via Netflix)

The show also more accurately represents Indian Americans by portraying second-generation immigrants grappling with their identity. When my friends and I watched *Never Have I Ever* together, they told me that they felt seen since they could relate to Devi's insecurities; they felt too brown to belong at school but not brown enough to belong at cultural events with relatives, just as Devi had felt at Ganesh Puja. Though this internal conflict never takes center stage, I appreciate that Kaling purposely crafts it around Ramakrisnan's Tamil-American background to illustrate the impacts on her character—if only briefly.

In addition to subverting racial stereotypes, the series puts young women in power roles. Devi is outspoken, unlike old Hollywood female leads. She is also unapologetic in pursuing Paxton and initiates conversation, even if the show overemphasizes her infatuation with him. Most importantly, Devi recognizes her own worth. She refuses to listen to an admissions counselor who suggests that she use her father's death to differentiate herself from other Indian applicants. She believes that she is worthy of love as well, which was gratifying for my friend Amiya—who is darker skinned too—to see instead of a 'fair and lovely' girl in this role.

Devi takes charge in pursuing Paxton, albeit at the expense of her friends; she makes them change their personalities and enlists them to help her make a TikTok to get his attention despite their aversion to dancing. (Photo via Netflix)

Although Devi's best friends receive less screen time, they too are independent and dynamic. In contrast to stereotypes that Asian women are introverted, Eleanor acts in dramas and dresses flamboyantly; later episodes reveal that this is because she wants to emulate her absent mother. Meanwhile, Fabiola programs robots and wears polos, deviating from traditional ideas of femininity. She eventually comes out as gay also and provides much-needed visibility for other multiracial lesbians. In tandem with refreshing themes like self-discovery and reconciliation, these rich characters warrant celebrating the show.

Effectiveness

To that end, I believe that *Never Have I Ever* is a promising step towards greater representation. Its efforts to amplify minority voices do have limitations though. As the show tries to reverse negative stereotypes, it simultaneously perpetuates others to appeal to a broader audience.

For example, the producers make Nalini a single, working mother to combat images of South Asian women in domestic roles. At the same time, she feeds into other stereotypes about Indians, such as the strict, closed-off mother. Nevertheless, maybe the writers made these choices to expose those problematic views. Since Nalini adopts the stereotypical mindset of internalizing her grief, she strains her relationship with Devi and cannot find closure.

The show stereotypes Nalini through her reluctance to see a therapist. (GIF via Tumblr)

Kamala presents a similar duality. One one hand, she dispels stereotypes about arranged marriages because she likes her match more than the man she had secretly dated. On the other hand, her character prolongs associating such arrangements with South Asians. Tropes to make the series more palatable for American audiences—such as Kamala's heavy accent and taking love advice from *Riverdale*—also misrepresent Indians.

Finally, the show fails to develop other minority characters. Take Devi's half-Japanese crush Paxton and gay classmate Jonah. Instead of exploring their race and sexuality, the series uses them to mainstream diversity and write punchlines. Likewise, Jewish nemesis Ben is stereotyped as a rich overachiever for comic relief. These lows left me wishing for more depth in season two, so that these groups may get the representation they deserve.

CONCLUSION

Overall, I applaud *Never Have I Ever* for more accurately representing South Asians, even though the execution is imperfect. Some viewers expect Kaling to do more, given that she is the first Indian-American woman to break the comedy glass ceiling: speak for an entire ethnic group. Captivate global audiences without mainstreaming cultures. But I think it's unfair to assume that Kaling can carry that burden of representation alone because the entertainment industry's demands limit her from delivering the narratives we hope to see. Thus, we must share our own stories. Shatter those ceilings. And encourage others to do the same.