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The Indian American Experience in U.S. Media: Insights from *Never Have I Ever*

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Introduction

The Indian diaspora is currently the second largest diaspora in the United States, with over 5 million Indian Americans residing in the country (Statista). Of these 5.4 million, 3.3 million are of Indian origin born in the United States, while 2.1 million are Indian nationals residing in the US (Statista). Despite its substantial size, this diaspora has remained relatively underrepresented in American media (Gupta 43). Very few films and television series feature Indian-origin characters without presenting them in a stereotypical or biased manner (Gupta 43). Such characters are often relegated to secondary and one-dimensional roles, preventing a representation with which the diaspora can truly identify. Recent cultural productions, however, have sought to challenge these biases by presenting more nuanced and inclusive representations. The Netflix series *Never Have I Ever*, created by Mindy Kaling and Lang Fisher, exemplifies this shift. The series follows Devi Vishwakumar, an Indian American teenager navigating the challenges of high school, family dynamics, and her dual cultural identity. Through its exploration of the diverse experiences within the Indian diaspora, the show offers a critical lens on issues of identity, integration, and representation in contemporary American media. Therefore, it is pertinent to examine the evolution of the Indian diaspora in the United States, the social and identity challenges it faces, and how these issues are reflected in American media, particularly through the Netflix series *Never Have I Ever*. The subject of this thesis was inspired by courses in the master's programme that explore the Indian diaspora from various perspectives. For example, Delphine Munos' course, *English Literature C*, examines the Indian diaspora in the Caribbean through the lens of indenture contracts, while Marie Herbillon's course on English civilisation addresses the experiences of the Indian diaspora in England. These classes raised critical questions about diaspora representation and the identity crises that can emerge during the transition from Eastern to Western societies.

To better understand the evolution of the Indian diaspora, this study will examine the political, social, and economic landscapes that have shaped migration patterns over time using Barbara Metcalf and Thomas Metcalf's book *A Concise History of Modern India* (2006) as well as Hermann Kulke and Dietmar Rothermund *A History of India* (2016). From the colonial era under British rule to the present day, each era will be shown to have distinctly shaped the motivations and circumstances driving Indian migration. Moreover, the intricate interplay of

historical, social, and political factors within India itself will greatly influence these patterns. The relationship between India and the West is complex, rooted in British colonial policies, coupled with internal social and economic disparities, which have created significant 'push' and 'pull' factors that encourage or force Indians to emigrate globally. Understanding these historical dynamics will be essential to unraveling the complexity of the Indian diaspora.

The part on the Indian diaspora will explain the main aspects of what a diaspora is according to Judith T. Shuval's "Migration: Definitional Ambiguities and a Theoretical Paradigm Diaspora Theory" (2002) as well as explore the different types of diaspora observed in Indian society, drawing from Parvati Raghuram and Ajaya Kumar Sahoo's chapter "Thinking 'Indian Diaspora' for Our Times" in *Tracing an Indian Diaspora: Contexts, Memories, Representations* (Raghuram et al., 2008). Finally, an overview of the history and scale of the Indian diaspora in the United States will be given, using *The Encyclopedia of the Indian Diaspora* (Lal, 2006) and the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace's online article "Social Realities of Indian Americans: Results From the 2020 Indian American Attitudes Survey" (Badrinathan et al., 2021).

The paper's theoretical frameworks will centre on the social realities of the South Asian minority in the United States, drawing on key themes relevant to the Indian diaspora. It will begin by examining the evolution of American society's attitudes towards immigrants, from the assimilationist Melting Pot metaphor to a multicultural model drawing from Mohamed Berray's article "A Critical Literary Review of the Melting Pot and Salad Bowl Assimilation and Integration Theories" (2019) and Heike Paul's chapter "E Pluribus Unum?: The Myth of the Melting Pot" in his book *The Myths That Made America* (2014). This introduction will lay a foundation for comprehending the wider socio-cultural context that shapes the journeys of South Asian communities. It will then delve into the intricacies of social discrimination, beginning with the myth of the model minority. This section will include an examination of its underlying principles and the impact it has on both individual South Asians and their communities, both internally and externally using Tahseen Shams's article "Successful yet Precarious: South Asian Muslim Americans, Islamophobia, and the Model Minority Myth" (2020) and Suchi S. Daga and Vaishali V. Raval's study on "Ethnic–Racial Socialisation, Model Minority Experience, and Psychological Functioning Among South Asian American

Emerging Adults: A Preliminary Mixed-Methods Study" (2018) as primary sources. Furthermore, it will explore the controversial concept of hyphenated identities, using Vijay Mishra's perception on the concept (2008) and focusing on how these identities navigate various forms of acculturation and the impact on family dynamics and the construction of ethnic identity, particularly among young adults. Finally, the discussion will turn to the Orientalist stereotypes that South Asians face, specifically those experienced by Indian women, at the intersection of race and gender using Edward Said Orientalism (1987) and Kimberlé Crenshaw's article "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color" (1991).

Having established the fundamental aspects of the social realities of the Indian diaspora, the study will then provide an overview of the media landscape that shapes Indian portrayals drawing from Amit Gupta article "Indian is the New Black? The Rise of Indian-Americans on American Television" (2016). This section will begin with a brief history of South Asian representation in American media and its relationship to the identity development of the Indian diaspora in the United States. Next, it will examine the show's platform – Netflix – focusing on its commitment to diversity. Finally, it will explore the role of Mindy Kaling, the show's producer and creator, as a prominent figure and product of the Indian diaspora in the United States.

Using these tools, the thesis will aim to analyse the series *Never Have I Ever* and demonstrate how it enriches the representation of Indians in American media, as well as how it addresses discriminatory issues faced by the Indian diaspora in the United States, enriching U.S. media representations of Indian Americans as well as giving more complex and realistic portrayals.

Methodology

This paper assumes that Never Have I Ever offers a more varied and nuanced portrayal of the Indian diaspora in the United States. It does so by giving prominence to characters who have typically been marginalised in previous media depictions. By exploring themes of integration challenges, intergenerational tensions, and the construction of ethnic identity within the Indian American community, the series challenges traditional stereotypes, particularly the model minority myth and Orientalist prejudices. By examining the programme through the lens of diaspora studies and identity matters, this thesis aims to establish that it offers a more authentic and nuanced representation of this group in US media.

To prove these hypotheses, I watched all four seasons of the series, broadcasted between 2020 and 2023, and selected instances relevant for this paper. From these four seasons, each comprising 10 episodes (see appendix), I selected the episodes that were most relevant to the themes under study.

In season 1, which mainly aims to lay the foundations of the story (introducing the main characters, their origins and their arrival in the United States), I decided to keep a large number of episodes. This is the richest season in terms of cultural identity, with one episode that is particularly representative of the identity issues faced by the Indian diaspora. I have selected episodes 1, 2, 3, 4, 8, 9 and 10 (see appendix).

Season 2 addresses a central theme of diaspora theory: the return if the immigrant to the country of origin. It also introduces new characters from the Indian diaspora, providing an enriching comparison between two similar characters but with different attitudes to identity. The episodes selected for this season are 2, 4 and 7 (see appendix).

Season 3 highlights a character introduced in season two, Manish, providing a counter-example and an additional representation of the Indian diaspora. The episodes retained for this season are 1, 3 and 10 (see appendix).

Finally, season 4 focuses more on the progress of the story than on issues of identity or representation of the Indian diaspora. Therefore, the only episodes relevant to this paper are 2,

9 and 10 (see appendix). In addition, I will cite briefly episodes outside of that selection for the understanding of the plot and to enrich the analysis.

Historical Content:

The Historical Ties Between India and the West

The ties between India and the West date back to the beginning of the 17th century when British merchants approached the shores of India (Metcalf and Metcalf). The subcontinent was a major centre of international trade, attracting many European merchants and explorers, such as the Dutch Trading company, French Merchants and the East India Company, a British trade company (Metcalf and Metcalf 44). However, before the arrival of the East India Company, India was an intricate system of kingdoms and empires, with the Mughal Empire dominating much of the subcontinent (Metcalf and Metcalf). The cultural, religious and political diversity of this period laid the foundations for India's later history (Metcalf and Metcalf).

The East India Company Raj

Chartered by Queen Elizabeth and established on December 31, 1600, the English East India Company (EIC) was one of several European trading endeavours that aimed to exploit the wealth of the East (Metcalf and Metcalf 44). The main goal of this joint-stock company was to enter the Eastern trading market and leverage trade opportunities while distributing risks and profits among investors (Metcalf and Metcalf 44). Upon entering the Asian trading industry, the EIC encountered other European competitors who had established themselves in the Indian market years earlier, thereby influencing the company's trajectory in the region. The Dutch East India Company, for instance, had a monopoly on spice in the East Indies archipelagos; therefore, forcing British merchants to seek profits on the mainland as well as finding other goods to trade, such as saltpetre, used in gunpowder, indigo (a blue dye) and Indian textiles (Metcalf and Metcalf 45).

Another factor that helped the East India Company into becoming the main trader in India is the timing of their arrival. Indeed, the English encountered a different situation in India compared to the Dutch in South-East Asia. While the Dutch easily conquered smaller local rulers in the archipelago, the English faced the Mughal Empire at the peak of its power, rendering conquest an unrealistic option. Instead, they sought entry into Indian markets through diplomacy and by petitioning for trade privileges. The Mughals, aiming to counterbalance the dominance of the Portuguese and later the Dutch, welcomed the English. Likewise, Indian

merchants saw their arrival as an opportunity to expand profitable trade networks (Metcalf and Metcalf 45).

In the earlier part of the eighteenth century, the English East India Company confined its activities to the coastal trade of India and did not interfere in the politics of the country (Metcalf and Metcalf 44). However, following their victory in the Battle of Plassey in 1757, which involved British forces against French mercenaries and Indian forces, the East India Company began to expand their territory (Metcalf and Metcalf 52). The Company's triumph was achieved through a mix of political and military factors. Indeed, they had military advantages over their rivalling powers, both domestic and foreign, thanks to their superior gun technology and the training that European-trained infantry received, and thanks to the colonel Robert Clive, who managed to form an alliance with a corrupted Indian 'nawab' –a governor appointed by the king – to further enrich the British traders (Metcalf and Metcalf 52). This victory at Plassey placed the East India Company in a position of dominance not only in Bengal but eventually also over all the other European trading firms established in India (Metcalf and Metcalf 53).

Nonetheless, to better understand how a British trading company managed to take control of parts of India, it is essential to examine how the lands of India were governed before the British arrival and how the Mughal Empire, in place at the time, contributed to its own decline (Metcalf and Metcalf). The Mughal empire was a "vertical system" (Metcalf and Metcalf 29) in which the Mughal emperor was the "king of kings" (29). Consequently, the Mughal dynasty relied mainly on the loyalty of the rulers of each respective province, and because of the regions' cultural and religious diversity – Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs, etc. – the political system lacked cohesion and unity on a national level (Barbara D. Metcalf). For many, the emperor Aurangzeb was the primary responsible for the decline of the empire. Indeed, as king of kings, he opted for a strict power centred on Islam with the desire to create a monolithic Indian society that looked only to Muslims, or at least favoured them over other religions (Metcalf and Metcalf 29). After his death, Aurangzeb's successor failed to maintain this strict regime, and the empire began to disintegrate, eventually leading to its decline (Metcalf and Metcalf 23). Moreover, Barbara D. Metcalf, in the book, A Concise History of Modern India, identifies three "crucial 'fault lines'" that failed the centralisation of the Mughal Power : the

implementation of zamindars, local men who knew the customs of the villages and who could exercise power over its inhabitants, but who later would resist imperial power; the establishment of princely rulers, who recognised the Mughal power but exercised their own dominion over their territory, mainly in inaccessible or secluded areas; and finally, the provincial governors, who were chosen by the emperor himself as administrators of areas where they had no preexisting local connections. Their primary role was to amass taxes from these areas, but over time some regions grew consequent wealth and no longer wanted to pay taxes to the empire (Metcalf and Metcalf 30–33).

As a result, during the eighteenth century, the EIC had more opportunities to do business with local rulers, allowing them to enrich themselves financially and politically through corrupting local administrators who were loyal to their own interests (Metcalf and Metcalf 30). In 1765, the EIC signed a treaty with the Mughal emperor to obtain the title of revenue minister, giving them complete control over Bengal, the richest province (Metcalf and Metcalf 52). This success provided the company with additional funds to invest in a stronger army than their Indian rivals and to implement a more effective state structure (Metcalf and Metcalf 55).

The numerous regions under the colonial control of the EIC were affected by the restructuring of the system; however, the British aim was not to fundamentally disrupt Indian society by replicating the British system in India. Instead, they sought to adapt their regulations to Indian civilisation and restore the prestige of India's past – its Antiquity period, which was regarded by some scholars, such as Sir William Jones, as the height of its civilisation, comparable to Ancient Greece and Rome (Metcalf and Metcalf 57, 62–63). To govern the Indian provinces, the EIC's administration operated by appointing a governor-general to oversee the regions. Warren Hastings was the first to be appointed to this role in 1772 (Metcalf and Metcalf 56). Numerous adjustments and reforms were implemented across various fields. In education, there was a shift from traditional Arabic and Sanskrit education to Western subjects, with a strong emphasis on the English language, driven by the Anglicists movement (Metcalf and Metcalf 83). This period also saw the establishment of government-run schools in major cities (Metcalf and Metcalf 83). In politics, the creation of the Indian Civil Service centralised the collection of funds from districts, reserving these positions exclusively for "Europeans of British origins" (Metcalf and Metcalf 59). As for law, under Hastings'

administration, the EIC believed that India had ancient and fixed laws that had become corrupted over time and aimed to restore these original laws so that there would no longer be British dependence on Indian jurists trained in Sanskrit or Arabic (Metcalf and Metcalf 58). Hastings was also convinced that Hindus and Muslims had distinct legal systems, insisting that the Koran should govern Muslim civil cases and the Shaster should govern Hindu ones, thus simplifying India's diverse communities into two main groups defined by their religious texts, which later on significantly influenced the organisation of Indian society (Metcalf and Metcalf 58).

The major military reforms and changes under British rule involved several strategic measures. To begin, the British instiled in the Sepoy Army – a private mercenary army appointed by the British and constituted of Indian soldiers recruited primarily from the high-caste Hindu peasantry – a sense of pride and regimental loyalty to maintain its effectiveness as a mercenary force. They also adapted to their caste and religious sensibilities by prohibiting common messing, not requiring overseas service, and acknowledging Hindu festivals (Metcalf and Metcalf 61). However, these accommodations projected a weak image of the government and left it vulnerable to protests and mutinies (Metcalf and Metcalf 61). One of the main events that triggered the Indian uprising against the East Indian company was the revolt of the Sepoys (Metcalf and Metcalf 100). The revolt took place in 1857 when the British introduced new cartridges to the army. Indeed, these new items, which the soldiers had to use their mouths to tear apart, were greased with animal fat (cow or pork). So, due to religious reasons, many Hindu and Muslim sepoys refused to use the new cartridges. In response, the British expelled and publicly humiliated those who disobeyed orders (Metcalf and Metcalf 101). Rumours among Indians were circulating that the British were purposefully violating the soldiers' religious values by handling these cartridges, with a view to converting them to Christianity after they had become contaminated with animal fat (Kulke and Rothermund 206). After this humiliation, the Sepoys decided to revolt against their British superiors and massacred the British inhabitants of Meerut, a city in the north of India. Revolt spread across the North Indian region from Bihar to Punjab and parts of central India (Metcalf and Metcalf 101). Various groups, including landlords, peasants, princes, and merchants, joined for their own reasons. However, some groups remained loyal to the British administration and supported the Western colonisers instead of their Indian peers. Among them were the Western-educated Bengali intelligentsia, Punjabi soldiers, and Bombay and Madras armies (Metcalf and Metcalf 103). Indian resistance

to the Company's domination culminated with the Sepoy Revolt, marking the end of this period and the beginning of the British Raj under the control of the British Crown.

The British Raj

On August 2, 1858, the British Parliament passed the Act for Better Government of India, handing the British Crown authority over India and ending the English East India Company's rule (Metcalf and Metcalf 103). This period of British colonial rule in India, which lasted from 1858 to 1947, is known as the British Raj, and represents an important phase in the history of India's ties with the West (Metcalf and Metcalf 103). Under the British Crown, India became one of the numerous colonies of the empire. Therefore, social practices were reviewed, and new practices and beliefs were reinterpreted. For instance, there were guides for how widows could earn sufficient salary to keep their independence or how to implement new means of communications such as trains and post offices (Metcalf and Metcalf 146).

Under the British Empire, the Indian economy was heavily impacted by British imports and Indian exports. There were few means of communication, which slowed the pace of economic growth (Kulke and Rothermund 207). Moreover, the first half of the nineteenth century was marked by severe deflation. The British, having used India's money to finance their trade with China and other countries, caused the Indian currency to depreciate, resulting in stifled economic development (Kulke and Rothermund 207). Cheap food and raw materials enabled local artisans to survive against competition from industrial imports, but Indian agriculture remained stagnant and dependent on the monsoon. The British emphasised heavy agricultural production, leading to soil degradation at the expense of sustainable cultivation (Kulke and Rothermund 207). Despite the security that political control offered British capitalists, only 10% of British overseas investments went to India, and were primarily directed towards railways. Indian entrepreneurs found it difficult to raise capital in London, as it was difficult to repay gold while earning silver, the material on which the Indian currency was based, thus limiting the beginnings of industrial development (Kulke and Rothermund 207). Dadabhai Naoroji, the "Grand Old Man of Indian Nationalism" and the first Indian elected to the British House of Commons, was critical of British claims to rule India for its own good, calling it 'pure [st] romance' and pointing out that the draining of resources was a crucial part of an economic system that protected Britain's global economic position (Metcalf and

Metcalf 124–125). Indeed, funds from India were transferred to England every year to liquidate the Company's old shares, repay investment debts and finance the India Office, thereby increasing the tax burden on India's peasant population (Metcalf and Metcalf 125).

As a result, many Indian nationalist movements arose during the colonial period (Metcalf and Metcalf 123). As education became more widely available, the number of educated Indians increased, and they began to request to be included in government structures (Metcalf and Metcalf 135). The Municipal Councils Act of 1882 gave local bodies responsibility for education, sanitation and public health, as well as the power to raise local taxes. In 1892, the Indian Councils Act introduced restricted elections for legislative councils and allowed provincial councils the right to discuss the annual budget (Metcalf and Metcalf 135). Prominent early nationalists such as Gopal Krishna Gokhale played an important role in these councils, advocating for universal education, greater Indian representation in government and increased employment opportunities (Metcalf and Metcalf 135). The restriction of public roles available to educated Indians at the end of the nineteenth century was a major political issue (Metcalf and Metcalf 135). Consequently, in 1885, seventy English-educated Indians formed the Indian National Congress in Bombay, marking the beginning of the longest-lasting nationalist movement in the colonial world still in place today (Metcalf and Metcalf 136). Congress members were often previously involved in local nationalist organisations that represented Indian interests in the government, such as the Calcutta Indian Association and the Poona Sarvajanik Sabha (Metcalf and Metcalf 136). The Congress attempted to include Muslim Indians, but many Muslim leaders, such as Sayyid Ahmad Khan, felt that the Congress could not represent both Hindus and Muslims, showing once again the religious distinction that exists in Indian society (Metcalf and Metcalf 137). In the early years of the Congress, the demands were centred on loyal opposition, avoiding religious controversies and social reforms, and focusing instead on political and economic issues, such as seeking greater Indian participation in legislative councils and opening employment to Indians in the Indian Civil Service (Metcalf and Metcalf 137).

Another important figure in the movement for India's independence is Mahatma Gandhi (Metcalf and Metcalf 131). Gandhi, born in 1869 in Gujarat, returned to India in 1915 after making a name for himself as a leader of the Indian minority in South Africa (Kulke and

Rothermund 237). He studied law in England before devoting himself to the defence of civil rights and Indian independence (Kulke and Rothermund 237). With the non-cooperation movement, which is an important chapter in India's struggle for independence, Gandhi massively contributed to the freedom of India (Kulke and Rothermund 237). The movement began with the Rowlatt Satyagraha non-violent protest, in response to the Rowlatt Acts, which permitted the detention of political prisoners without trial (Kulke and Rothermund 237; *Britannica*). This action marked the first experience of non-violent resistance on a national scale. Gandhi's protest approach was based on passive resistance and civil disobedience. He was convinced that unjust laws should be challenged by non-violent means (Kulke and Rothermund 237). One of the key moments in the non-cooperation movement was the Salt March in 1930, when Gandhi and his followers marched to the sea to make salt, in rebellion against the British monopoly on salt production. This act of civil disobedience drew national and international attention as a symbol of the intense struggle against colonial oppression (Kulke and Rothermund 242-243). Gandhi's movement also included widespread boycotts of British institutions, products, and authority figures. He emphasised self-sufficiency, urging Indians to spin their own cloth, known as khadi, to prone economic independence from British goods. This was part of the broader Swadeshi movement, which promoted the use of domestic products and the rejection of foreign goods (239). His non-cooperation movement aimed to unite Indians across religions and regions in a collective fight for freedom, though Gandhi's Hindu background influenced his methods and ideology in many ways (Metcalf and Metcalf 171–172). Despite internal disagreements and difficulties within the Congress Party, Gandhi's leadership and moral authority, although controversial to some, were crucial in mobilising large numbers of people against British rule. His message of non-violence and civil resistance inspired millions, directly contributing to India's eventual independence in 1947 (Metcalf and Metcalf 169).

On August 15, 1947, the Independence of India Act of 1947 was signed, and Jawaharlal Nehru became the first Prime Minister of the Congress. The Constituent Assembly began drafting a new constitution, which was adopted on January 26, 1950, officially establishing the Republic of India. The constitution upheld secularism and democracy, reflecting the diverse aspirations of Indian civilisation (Kulke and Rothermund 267).

After India's Independence

Another challenge that India faced right before its independence and that continued after was the partition of the country into India and Pakistan. The partition was primarily driven by the demand for a separate Muslim state, advocated by Muhammad Ali Jinnah, the leader of the Muslim League (Kulke and Rothermund 252). The partition saw the division of territories in Punjab and Bengal, resulting in widespread violence, bloodshed, and the displacement of millions of people with mass migrations of Hindus and Sikhs moving to India and Muslims to Pakistan (Kulke and Rothermund 252). The process of partition was marked by communal riots, atrocities, and the loss of lives and property on both sides (Kulke and Rothermund 260). There were long-term effects from India's partition: both newly formed countries struggled with the influx of refugees, faced economic challenges, and social unrest. The region of Kashmir played a particular role in the conflicts of partition (Kulke and Rothermund 260-262). Pakistan, in particular, faced internal divisions and conflicts, leading to ongoing tensions and issues between its eastern and western regions. The unresolved issues between the two countries, including the distribution of assets and resources after partition, continued to fuel tensions (Kulke and Rothermund 260-262).

India also confronted various economic challenges, including poverty, unemployment, and underdeveloped industrial and infrastructure sectors, compounded by the legacy of British colonial rule (Kulke and Rothermund). The lack of industrialisation meant India had to rapidly build its industrial base to meet the demands of a growing population, but limited resources, outdated technology, and an agrarian-focused economy slowed this process. Unemployment rose sharply as the population increased, with the job market unable to keep pace, particularly in rural areas. Poverty was widespread, with many living below the poverty line and lacking access to basic needs like food, shelter, and healthcare. The agrarian sector, despite the boost from the Green Revolution in the 1960s, faced issues such as land fragmentation, low productivity, and environmental degradation, further exacerbating economic difficulties (Kulke and Rothermund 277). These economic struggles, combined with inadequate infrastructure development, hindered economic growth and job creation, prompting many Indians to emigrate in search of better opportunities. Countries like the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, and Australia became popular destinations for Indian emigrants seeking higher wages, better job prospects, and improved living standards (Kulke and Rothermund).

The Indian Diaspora

Diaspora Theory

The definition of diaspora has evolved over time. To the Ancient Greeks, a diaspora was simply associated with concepts of migration and colonisation, and initially, the term was used to refer to particular ethnic groups, such as Greeks, Jews and Armenians (Shuval 42). However, as the term has evolved over time, the definition of a diaspora has broadened its semantic scope to include any group that has been uprooted or displaced for political, economic or social reasons, whether it was voluntarily or involuntarily (Shuval 42). Thus, the term can be used for groups such as "political refugees, alien residents, guest workers, immigrants, expellees, ethnic and racial minorities and overseas communities" (Shuval 42). Moreover, the diaspora implies a metaphorical meaning and is used increasingly by groups who feel and maintain a connection, real or imagined, with their country of origin [Safran quoted by Shuval 42].

Many scholars interpret diasporas in different ways. Gabriel Sheffer proposes a simple definition and describes modern diasporas as "minority ethnic groups of migrant origin who reside and act in their host country while retaining strong sentimental and material links with their country of origin" (Sheffer quoted by Shuval 43). Gérard Chaliand and Jean-Pierre Rageau adopt a more social vision and define the diaspora according to four criteria: forced dispersal, the maintenance of a collective memory of the history and culture of dispersal, the desire to pass on heritage, and the longevity of the group over time (Shuval 42). However, in the various existing definitions, the same essential elements can be found: "a history of dispersal, myths/memories of the homeland, alienation in the host country, desire for eventual return (which can be ambivalent, eschatological or utopian), ongoing support of the homeland, and a collective identity" (Shuval 43). According to Shuval, a diaspora is seen as a social construct in which individuals scattered around the world maintain a sense of uniqueness and a deep connection with their country of origin (43). The concept is therefore based on a combination of "feeling, consciousness, memory, mythology, history, meaningful narratives, group identity, longings, dreams, allegorical and virtual elements, all of which play a role in establishing a diaspora reality" (Shuval 43). All these aspects contribute to establishing a "diasporic reality", where the emotional link with the homeland must be strong enough to resist being forgotten, assimilated or removed (Shuval 43).

As previously mentioned, diasporas do not always stem from forced displacement, but can arise from various factors such as genocide, political, religious, or racial persecution, or even economic, societal, and political pressures. With the goal of stating the difference between diaspora migration and any other migration, Shuval claims that migrants, unlike diaspora migrants, wish to be part of the society that hosts them. Therefore, they are ready to leave behind their cultural baggage. Whereas diaspora migrations do not give up on their cultural background; they nourish their attachment and loyalty to their country, language and culture of origin, which they feel they have left behind (Shuval 46). Shuval also argues that "immigrant communities" usually last three generations before ceasing to identify as immigrants and occasionally only maintaining an ethnic identity. However, the sense of a diaspora, i.e. an enduring connection to an ancestral homeland, can emerge or resurface several generations later, depending on changes and evolution in the host society or in the country of origin (Shuval 46).

Diaspora theory revolves around three sets of actors: the diasporic group, the host society and the homeland – real or imagined. Shuval proposes an interpretation of the triangular relationship by analysing the dynamics between one pair of actors in relation to the third. The relationship between the 'diaspora-homeland' pair with the host society manifests itself in the connections present between the diasporic group and the host country (46-47). Depending on the political orientations of the host country regarding the homeland, electoral behaviour and other forms of political support or non-support on the part of the diaspora group towards the host country can occur. These behaviours can be towards the host country or towards a specific group supporting the policies of the host country (Shuval 46-47). The 'diaspora-host society' dynamic in relation to the homeland revolves around an ambivalent attitude, between nostalgia for the homeland and estrangement from it. The diasporic group may be reluctant to return to their country of origin because of potential traumas and may perceive the homeland in varying ways, sometimes as a future utopian goal or as a place of political or social insecurity (Shuval 46-47). Finally, the homeland may adopt an attitude towards the diaspora group, ranging from cultural and emotional support to strategic use to obtain political or material support from host countries. In India, for example, specific regulations have been put in place for diasporic groups abroad, such as "attractive investment packages and financial concessions" (Raghuram et al. 4). The country also distinguishes Non-Resident Indians (NRIs) – Indians with Indian citizenship residing abroad – from People of Indian Origin (PIOs) – Indians by origins without Indian

citizenship, and offers these groups economic investment advantages as well as maintaining a cultural link (Raghuram et al. 4).

The Old Indian Diaspora vs the New Indian Diaspora

One the one hand, the old Indian diaspora primarily refers to Indian populations that migrated during the colonial period. These migrations were largely driven by British colonial policies, such as indenture systems, which were an updated form of slavery in which Indians were seduced into leaving their homeland to earn better wages in the British colonies, i.e. the Caribbean, Mauritius and Africa (Raghuram et al. 9; Munos). Indians in the old diaspora often occupied a complex space, positioned between the British colonisers and other colonised groups, as is the case with the indentured Indians in the Caribbean, which were situated between the British and the recently freed enslaved Africans (Raghuram et al. 9; Munos). Post-decolonisation, the histories and experiences of these communities diverged as they adapted to the policies of newly independent states. These communities often faced racialised targeting and further migrations, not necessarily back to India but to other regions, primarily in the West (Raghuram et al. 9; Munos).

On the other hand, the new Indian diaspora is characterised by postcolonial migrations, often driven by the agency and choices of the migrants themselves (Raghuram et al. 9). These migrations are marked by a shift towards middle-class professionals seeking opportunities outside India. This diaspora is marked by a greater diversity among migrants and a more pronounced middle-class presence (Raghuram et al. 9). The conditions of mobility and selection of migrants are notably different from those of the colonial period, reflecting changes in global migration patterns and the evolving socio-economic contexts in both the sending and receiving countries (Raghuram et al. 9,)

Indian Diaspora in the United States

Among immigrants in the United States, Indian Americans make up the second-largest group behind Mexican Americans (Badrinathan et al.; Passel). The diversity of the community has increased along with the rise in the number of people of Indian descent living in the United States – more than 4 million now (Badrinathan et al.). The population of Indian Americans

today is a patchwork of long-term locals and recent immigrants (Badrinathan et al.). Among the Indian diaspora in the US, approximately 38 percent of the group is not U.S. citizens, about 2.6 million hold U.S. citizenship, including 1.4 million who have been naturalised and 1.2 million who are U.S.-born (Badrinathan et al.).

Initially, Indian immigrants in the United States can be traced back to the early twentieth century, when a few agricultural workers from Punjab arrived on the west coast (Lal 314). Despite the fact that it was a small community, the annual influx of new immigrants sparked a wave of racist attacks on the newly established community. For white Americans, Indian immigrants were seen as impossible to assimilate due to their improper manners and were seen as the "most undesirable, of all the eastern Asiatic races" (Lal 314). Peasant immigrants, most of whom were illiterate and did not speak English, lacked the power to combat the growing racism (Lal 314). During this period, American policies were created to limit immigration to the strong, healthy men needed to work on railroads. Legislation was passed, and tests were used to determine whether a person was likely to become a 'public charge' (Lal 315).

It was after 1965 that the present phase of Indian American history began. That year, the Immigration and Naturalisation Act was passed, setting a quota of 20,000 visas for each country in the Eastern Hemisphere (Lal 316). Unlike the first wave of Indian immigrants, the second wave after 1965 consisted primarily of professionals and technical workers. The number of Indians increased drastically during the first decade, raising concerns about representation and self-representation (Lal 316). However, Indians come in a large range of skin tones and cannot be universally classified as either white or black, and moreover, Indian immigrants did not want to be categorised as black. The term "Indian" was out of question, since some Americans confused Native Americans with people from India. Therefore, it was not until the 1980s that the term Asian Indian was used to classify the minority, marking the emergence of the diasporic community (Lal 316).

The Indian diaspora in the United States grew significantly between 1998 and 1999, with a substantial influx of skilled professionals obtaining H-1B visas, which granted highly skilled foreigners a period of six years to find employment in the United States (Lal 317). Out of 134,000 H-1B visas issued, 63,900 were granted to Indians, and by 2003, 400,000 Indians held H-1B visas (Lal 317). Many of these visa holders eventually found ways to obtain

permanent residency in the U.S. (Lal 317). The 2000 census confirmed the high level of education among Indians, revealing that 63.9% had earned at least a bachelor's degree compared to 24.4% of Americans, thereby reinforcing the stereotype of a highly skilled diaspora (Lal 317). This emphasis on education extends to the subjects pursued in school. Practical fields such as science, engineering, and medicine are highly favoured, while more abstract disciplines like literature, arts, performing arts, and history are criticised (Lal 322). These educational preferences and achievements have contributed to the perception of the Indian diaspora as part of the "model minority group", a concept that will be explored further in the theoretical section (Lal 322). This newly educated Indian community was able to confront discrimination and even challenge U.S. political actions that opposed India's positions. For instance, in 1987, the National Federation of Indian American Associations (NFIA) mobilised the Indian community to successfully prevent Congress from selling advanced planes to Pakistan (Lal 318). Numerous organisations, such as the Federation of Indian Associations (FIA) and the National Association of Americans of Asian Indian Descent (NAAAID), launched various lobbying campaigns to counter discriminatory national acts and defend the interests of Indian immigrants (Lal 318). These efforts helped the community secure more rights at the local level, such as allowing Indian merchants in Los Angeles to install a sign designating "Little India" (Lal 318-319).

As for culture, the Indian diaspora in the United States, like any other diaspora, has made use of cultural vectors, such as literature, music and art, to counter racism and discrimination, as well as to create solidarity between members of the same minority (Lal 321). This diaspora also has a tendency to see their culture, i.e. Indian culture, as perfect, timeless, eternal and immutable. New generations in the diaspora are confronted with this fixed vision of Indian culture, particularly when high school and university students are forbidden all kinds of relationships outside marriage, or even interracial marriages, whereas back in India customs have evolved (Lal 322).

Theoretical Frameworks

The American Context: From the Melting Pot Metaphor to Multiculturalism

In the first half of the 20th century in America, the prevailing perspective on immigration was assimilationist, aimed at integrating them into the dominant culture (Paul 260). This thought was emphasised by the Melting Pot metaphor used to represent a "new" American society (Berray 143). The Melting Pot metaphor, first introduced by J. Hector St. John de Crevecoeur, a French immigrant to America in the late 18th century, designated the U.S. as a place where individuals from all nations "melted into a new race of men" (Berray 142). In 1908, Israel Zangwill's Broadway production *The Melting Pot*, which tells the story of a Jewish immigrant from Europe who fell in love with the daughter of his family's murderer back in Russia, reinforced and popularised the metaphor (Berray 143). Zangwill's play highlighted a process that favoured common American values over divisive ones by portraying the "new world", i.e. America, as a place where past identities are left behind and old ethnic loyalties fade (Paul 271). Therefore, the core concept of the Melting Pot theory is to assimilate various immigrant groups into a unified American identity, creating a new national identity that transcends individual ethnic backgrounds. The theory's proponents believed that this assimilation was essential for societal unity and economic prosperity (Paul 271). However, the metaphor has faced significant criticisms over the years.

The metaphor was criticised primarily for enforcing conformity and promoting an Anglo-Saxon-centric view, while marginalising the unique cultural identities of minority groups, such as Native Americans, African Americans, and Asian Americans (Paul 260, 275-278). This exclusion is evident in Israel Zangwill's and Crèvecoeur's seminal works, which ignore the presence and contributions of these non-white communities (Paul 260). Historically, practices of segregation and anti-miscegenation have also exacerbated this exclusion. For instance, Jim Crow laws – a set of statutes legalising segregation – were implemented after the end of the Civil War in the Southern States; these statutes aimed to prevent the mixing of races, for example, by prohibiting interracial marriages (*Facing History*; Henry).

Furthermore, while the Melting Pot metaphor initially aimed to promote unity and integration, it has also faced substantial criticism for its assimilationist approach, coercive nature, and disregard for the preservation of diverse cultural identities (Berray 144-145; Paul 276). Indeed, it created a burden for both the dominant and minority cultures to converge, ultimately resulting in the loss of unique identities and the rich diversity they bring (Berray 147). The metaphor also neglects the historical experiences, local contexts, and structural factors that influence the integration of the different ethnic groups (Berray 142). As we will see later, some minorities are considered superior simply because they have assimilated more than others, while ignoring the structural and systemic factors that influence group integration. As a result, many critics of the 'Melting Pot' theory have deemed it incompatible with the plurality of multicultural societies and have opened the way to other, more suitable models (Berray 143).

The country started to transform into a more exacerbated pluricultural society after the 1960s with the passage of various laws such as the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, which ended national immigration quotas and replaced them with visas for skilled-sponsored immigration and family reunification, allowing for mass migration (Berray 143-144). Given that the metaphor promoted uniformity and rejection of one's own culture, criticism of the Melting Pot metaphor gained traction, and alternatives to the Melting Pot emerged. One of the main alternatives to the metaphor is the Salad Bowl (Berray 143-144). Whereas the Melting Pot represented the 'new' American identity created by the blending of mainly European immigrants, the salad bowl metaphor captures the new multicultural society that America has become. Mohamed Berray, in his article "A Critical Literary Review of the Melting Pot and Salad Bowl Assimilation and Integration Theories" (2019), explores the metaphors of the Melting Pot and the Salad Bowl. He explains that the Salad Bowl metaphor, which is also referred to as the Mosaic theory, enables individuals to maintain their distinct cultural practices and values while contributing to the larger societal fabric (145). Therefore, it emphasises retaining unique cultural identities within a multicultural society, allowing different groups to coexist without assimilating completely (Berray 143). In other words, in a Salad Bowl we can see each ingredient, and we can control how much of these ingredients we can put in (Berray 144). This theory recognises the importance of diversity and individuality within a community and that people from different backgrounds can coexist harmoniously, contributing to the richness and vibrancy of society without losing their unique identities (Berray 143).

However, these metaphors are not definitively established or exclusive. None of them dominates or is considered superior to the other. They coexist and can be used interchangeably depending on the context and perspective. Moreover, the influence of these metaphors on perception and self-identification is significant. On the one hand, the Melting Pot theory can put pressure on immigrants to conform to a dominant culture, which is typically white and Anglo-Saxon, potentially erasing their cultural heritage and sense of self (Berray 142-143). On the other hand, the Salad Bowl or Mosaic theory supports inclusivity and acceptance of diverse identities, resulting in a positive impact on self-identification by allowing individuals to embrace and celebrate their cultural roots while remaining part of a larger community (Berray 144). Therefore, the choice of metaphor, whether it be the Melting Pot or the Salad Bowl, can significantly influence how individuals perceive themselves and others within a multicultural society.

The Model Minority Myth

The model minority myth emerged as an antithesis to the culture of poverty thesis, both of which gained prominence in the mid-twentieth century following the publication of the sociologist Daniel Patrick Moynihan's 1965 report, "The Negro Family" (Lee and Zhou 49). In his report, Moynihan tried to understand the persistent poverty among African Americans, which he attributed to what he called a "tangle of pathology" (Lee and Zhou 49) resulting from their weak and dysfunctional family structures. He based his research on the works of the anthropologist Oscar Lewis, who, many years prior, studied the persistent poverty of Mexican families and argued that while the causes of poverty are systemic, poverty also has intergenerational consequences, i.e. children who grow up in poverty adopt specific values, aspirations, and behaviours that trap them in their class position, making it difficult for them to escape poverty (Lee and Zhou 49-50). Once established, this culture of poverty becomes self-sustaining, is transmitted across generations, and resists change. Moynihan applied Lewis' model to lower classes of African Americans in the United States, concluding that in order to eradicate poverty, it was necessary to change the cultural values, aspirations, and behaviours of the African American lower class (Lee and Zhou 50). Essentially, Moynihan suggested that addressing poverty required altering the cultural context in which it persisted, not just addressing its systemic causes.

Politicians at the time saw the report as a gift, since it downplayed the impact of systemic racism and absolved society of its responsibility for the success of minorities, especially in the case of African Americans (Lee and Zhou 52). Simultaneously, academics and journalists started to show interest in the economic and educational accomplishments of Asian minorities, mainly those of Japanese and Chinese descent at first, but eventually broadening to include other Asian immigrants as well (Lee and Zhou 50-51). This minority was seen as the model to follow, unlike the African American minority, who was unable to climb the social ladder (Lee and Zhou 49-52). Therefore, the comparison of both minorities led to the creation of the model minority antithesis and concluded that discrimination had no bearing on non-white people's socio-economic success. It asserted that only determination and hard work could lead to success, eradicating the racial discrimination and systemic racism that other minorities faced (Lee and Zhou 50-51). Tahseen Shams in his article "Successful yet Precarious: South Asian Muslim Americans, Islamophobia, and the Model Minority Myth" (2020) states that:

> The model minority myth [is called] a 'pillar of inferential racism' because whereas this stereotype portrays blacks as a 'problem', it presents South Asians as a 'solution'. To glorify South Asians as successful because of their hard work infers that blacks are unsuccessful because of their character, thus diverting attention away from structural inequalities. (8-9)

Consequently, white nationalists were able to use this narrative to highlight the achievements of a particular Asian population and imply that systemic barriers were not the cause of racial disparities but rather the result of personal failures (Lee and Zhou 50-51). Not only did this comparison penalise the African American community, but it also pitted minorities against each other, elevating one group while disparaging the other.

Another collective consequence of this myth is that, despite Asian immigrants being perceived as a model, highly educated, and successful, they still face backlash in crisis. Unlike former European immigrants, whose stigmas eventually faded over time, Asian immigrants have yet to overcome their non-white status (Shams 11). Their quiet and non-disruptive integration has led them and American society to believe that the Asian minority is part of white society when they too face discrimination if they do not perform the stereotypes or if they overstep it. They remain 'model' if they conform; if they draw attention to themselves, they are singled out. To give an illustration, Asian immigrants are considered "good" as long as they

agree with and do not challenge mainstream politics. This expectation of political docility is reinforced by stereotypes that portray them as submissive and resilient (Shams 12).

On the individual level, the impact of the model minority stereotype on Indian Americans is multifaceted, carrying both positive and negative implications. The stereotype, which portrays Asian Americans, including Indian Americans, as academically successful, hardworking, and high achieving, can lead to expectations of success in academic and professional settings and the belief that these individuals face no social or discriminatory barriers to achievement. In Suchi S. Daga and Vaishali V. Raval's study on "Ethnic – Racial Socialisation, Model Minority Experience, and Psychological Functioning Among South Asian American Emerging Adults: A Preliminary Mixed-Methods Study" (2018), the research examines how ethnic-racial socialisation and the model minority experience impact the psychological functioning of South Asian American young adults. The study shows that while this stereotype can sometimes motivate individuals to excel, it also places immense pressure on them to live up to high expectations, resulting in psychological distress, anxiety, and feelings of inadequacy when they fall short (19, 23). Indian American individuals may feel pressured by their families, peers, and themselves to excel academically and professionally, which often stems from comparisons with other successful Indian Americans and the belief that they must uphold the model minority image (Daga and Raval 19).

For Indian Americans who do not conform to the model minority image, the stereotype can cause feelings of failure, self-doubt, and internalised shame, leading to discrimination or ostracisation within their own community (Daga and Raval 23-25). For example, individuals who struggle academically or professionally may feel isolated and judged. Furthermore, navigating identity and cultural expectations under the weight of this stereotype can create internal conflict, frustration, and confusion about one's identity and place in society. While some Indian Americans may accept the stereotype, others may find it unfair and limiting, leading to an internal struggle between accepting and challenging the stereotype (Daga and Raval 23-25).

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The Hyphenated Subject

The concept of "hyphenated identity", which refers to the identities of immigrants who combine their heritage with their American nationality (e.g. Mexican American, Chinese American), emerged as a significant topic of discussion around the early 20th century. The hyphen serves as a symbol representing the dual loyalties and experiences of immigrants, navigating between their country of origin and their new homeland, the United States (Baran 107).

Initially, the hyphenated identity was viewed as a marker of dichotomy, symbolising a struggle to choose between one's heritage and assimilation into American culture. Early perceptions often framed individuals with hyphenated identities as unable to fully commit to American life, leading to notions of failure or refusal to assimilate. President Woodrow Wilson, in 1914, for instance, criticised hyphenated Americans, arguing that they retained foreign allegiances that compromised their loyalty to the United States (Baran 109). Similarly, a year later, Theodore Roosevelt condemned hyphenated Americans (Baran 110), suggesting that true Americans should abandon their foreign ties and fully commit to American identity (Baran 111). These sentiments reflected a broader societal fear of divided loyalties and the desire for a homogeneous national identity, following the hegemonic influence at the time of the "melting pot" metaphor (Baran 111).

As the 20th century progressed, the perception of hyphenated identities began to evolve. The hyphen was reclaimed by hyphenated Americans, and some people began to embrace it as a source of pride, i.e., seeing it as a way of asserting their cultural heritage while finding their place in American society (Baran 107). As a result, many people who chose to embrace their

hyphenated identities interpreted the hyphen as a symbol of their complex, hybrid identity, celebrating both their culture of origin and their American identity (Baran 108). This shift is evident in the experiences of second-generation immigrants, who often engage in a negotiation of their identities that allows for fluidity and adaptability. Contemporary representations of hyphenated identities in literature and media continue to explore these themes, as seen in works like the 2015 sitcom *Fresh Off the Boat* inspired by Eddie Huang's memoir. The sitcom portrays a family of Taiwanese immigrants in America and their Asian American children navigating their hyphenated identities (Baran 130). However, it is important to know that the concept of hyphenated identity remains controversial in the U.S. For some, the hyphen symbolises solidarity and inclusivity, as reflected in preferences for terms like South Asian American. Others reject hyphenation entirely, viewing it as a barrier to full assimilation or a source of division (Badrinathan et al. 5). For instance, former Louisiana governor Bobby Jindal famously rejected the notion of being a hyphenated American, stating: "We came to America to be Americans. Not Indian Americans, simply Americans" (Badrinathan et al. 5).

Furthermore, the hyphenated identity concept intersects with discussions of race, ethnicity, and nationality. Non-white immigrants, particularly, face unique challenges in negotiating their identities due to societal perceptions and racial categorisations. This implication of race in the perception of the hyphenated American is raised by the theorist Vijay Mishra in his book *The Literature of the Indian Diaspora: Theorizing the Diasporic Imaginary* (2007). The chapter "The Law of the Hyphen and the Postcolonial Condition" investigates the socio-political implications of the "law of the hyphen" in the Indian diaspora (184). Mishra put in contrasts two different ways of thinking about categories or groups. The first, the law of genre (universalism), is about keeping things pure and separate. It means each category or genre (like types of books, music, or identities) should stay distinct and not mix with others. The goal is to set clear rules and create something solid and unchanging. The second perspective, the law of the hyphen (particularism), tries to find space for identities or categories that are not (yet) fully defined or recognised. This approach allows for mixing and ambiguity, accommodating things that do not fit neatly into established categories. While the law of genre seeks clarity and purity, the law of the hyphen embraces complexity and the ongoing process of becoming (184).

When looking at the context of the nation-state, the idea of a 'citizen' is presented as a pure and singular identity, without any hyphens (Mishra 184). This means that, similar to

official documents such as passports, a citizen is perceived as having one clear and uncomplicated national identity. However, Mishra emphasises that this pure, unhyphenated identity only applies to individuals whose appearance fits neatly into the nation's mainstream identity, which, in the case of the United States, is white and of European descent. Therefore, he claims that:

> For those of us who are outside this form of 'universal' identity politics, whose corporeality fissures the logic of unproblematic identification, plural/multicultural societies have constructed, for their unassimilable others, the impure genre of the hyphenated subject. But the politics of the hyphen itself is hyphenated because, in the name of empowering people, the classification indeed disempowers them; it makes them, to use a hyphenated term, 'emporingly-disempowered'. (184)

According to Mishra, the term was created in multicultural societies to categorise those deemed 'impure' (184) and by designating individuals with hyphenated identities, the term not only implies associated stereotypes but also marginalises them by suggesting they are less than fully American, positioning them as Asian Americans rather than simply Americans. In other words, the hyphenated subject according to Mishra is characterised by its antonym, the unhyphenated, and includes any individual that cannot confine to the definition of the 'ideal' citizen. This includes people with mixed or multiple identities (such as Asian American or Indian American) and who are seen as 'impure' or not fully fitting into the dominant national identity (Mihsra 184).

Later in the chapter, Mishra delves inside the Indian American community and observes two types of hyphenated subject with two contrasting attitudes toward identity (185-187). On the one hand, there is the "expatriate Indian," (187) who always wishes to return, which perpetuates and retains one Indian identity as well as considers oneself as an Indian living in America. On the other hand, there is the "immigrant American," (187) who, unlike the "expatriate Indian", overcomes the loss of the homeland and is not afraid of the transformation and evolution of its identity in a new cultural context. In other words, for the "expatriate Indian", identity is fixed and inseparable from their heritage; for the "immigrant American", identity is dynamic, fluid, and open to change. Mishra supports this distinction by referencing Bharati Mukherjee's essay "Two Ways to Belong in America" (1996), where the author contrasts her own immigrant experience with that of her sister. She explains that she and her sister have different perspectives on identity, since she chose to "renounc[e] 3,000 years (at

last) of caste-observant, 'pure culture' marriage in the Mukherjee family" (Mukherjee quoted by Mishra 186) whereas her sister married an Indian man who also came to study in America, thus not setting herself free from the guilt and loss of her homeland. This comparison highlights the different paths Indian immigrants may take when navigating their identity in a foreign land. Mukherjee represents those who embrace change and redefine themselves in a new cultural framework, while her sister exemplifies those who choose to maintain and perpetuate their cultural heritage. Thus, both sisters had opposing ways of navigating new settings and fell into different types of acculturations. One embraced the change while the other perpetuated her heritage.

Acculturation and Ethnic Identity

Acculturation refers to the process through which individuals adapt to a new culture while potentially maintaining aspects of their original culture. The study "East Meets West: Ethnic Identity, Acculturation, and Conflict in Asian Indian Families" (Farver et al.) examines the complex interplay between the level of acculturation in American immigrant parents, specifically Asian Indian parents, and the ethnic identity development of their American-born children. The study starts by laying the foundation of what is acculturation and the different styles that exist. The author distinguishes four different styles of acculturation:

Assimilation, which is a strategy that involves adopting the dominant culture while rejecting the original, i.e. becoming American, is abandoning and rejecting one's own cultural heritage.

Integration (or Biculturalism), unlike assimilation, proposes to maintain aspects of the original culture while also adopting elements of the host culture.

Separation in which the subject maintains the original culture while rejecting the host culture, this style of acculturation echoes Mishra's example of the 'expatriate Indian'.

Finally, marginalisation, which is characterised by the rejection of both the original culture and the host culture because of a lack of connections from both groups (Farver et al. 2).

The findings of the study suggest that there would be a strong connection between parents' acculturation styles and their children's ethnic identity. Parents who adopt an integrated or assimilated acculturation style tend to foster a more positive ethnic identity in their children. This is because these parents are more likely to encourage their children to engage with both their natal culture and the host culture. Consequently, children from these families report higher self-esteem, less anxiety, and fewer conflicts within the family environment (Farver et al. 4).

Conversely, families in which parents exhibit a separated or marginalised acculturation style increase family conflict and stress. Such parents may impose rigid adherence to their original culture, leading to a disconnect with the children who are trying to navigate their identities in a multicultural environment. Moreover, an acculturation gap – where children adapt more rapidly to the host culture than their parents – creates tension and can hinder children from forming a coherent ethnic identity (Farver et al. 4-5, 8).

Ethnic identity development is crucial during adolescence, as it influences self-esteem and psychological adjustment. The study also highlights that adolescents who successfully achieve a positive ethnic identity feel comfortable with their ethnicity and experience positive psychological adjustment, characterised by high self-esteem and a strong sense of belonging (Farver et al. 2-3) and are more likely to have parents who actively support their exploration of both their ethnic heritage and broader American culture. Indeed, family dynamics play a significant role in the ethnic identity formation of children. In families with aligned acculturation styles (i.e. both parents and children share similar views on cultural identity), there is generally less reported conflict, leading to a more supportive environment for ethnic identity development. When parents and children are on different acculturation paths, communication barriers and misunderstandings may arise, escalating family conflict and complicating the child's identity formation (Farver et al. 3, 6-7).

Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient

Orientalism is a term coined by the theorist Edward Said in the book *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient* (1978), in which he argues that Western scholarship and representations of the 'Orient' are rooted in colonialist attitudes and serve to perpetuate

stereotypes and power imbalances. He claims that this body of knowledge, termed "Orientalism," constructs the image of the Orient as the Other of the Occident, creating an "us" and "them" factor in which the Orient is the alien (43).

According to Said, the term 'Orient' refers to a specific geographical area that varies depending on the type of Orientalism (Said 4). For Europeans, the term 'Orient' traditionally encompasses India and the Biblical lands (the modern Middle East). In contrast, for Americans, the term Orient refers to a larger region, extending the field of Orientalism to the Far East, specifically Japan and China (Said 4, 17).

In terms of Orientalist productions, Europeans dominated the majority of it up until the Second World War because the 'Orient' was "the place of Europe's greatest and richest and oldest colonies, the source of its civilisations and languages, its cultural contestant, and one of its deepest and most recurring images of the Other" (Said 1). These Orientalist representations were depicted in European art and literature throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Many paintings, such as *The Snake Charmer* by Jean-Léon Gérôme (1879), portrayed the Arab world as an exotic fantasy full of belly dancers, snake charmers, magic lights and flying carpets (see fig. 1).
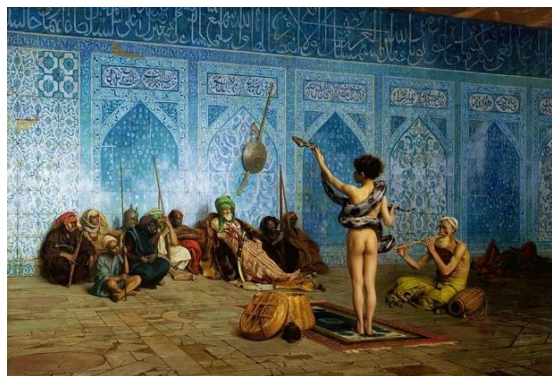
Fig. 1: Jean-Leon, Gerome, *The Snake Charmer*, Oil on canvas, 1879, (Massachusetts), https://www.clarkart.edu/artpiece/detail/snake-charmer

However, following World War II, Americans replaced Europeans as the leading Orientalist intellectuals, and the balance of power shifted in favour of an American focus on Orientalist concepts. The Israeli-Arab conflict took centre stage in Orientalist thinking, and the

subsequent shift in power also led to a focus on the Arab population by Western societies and more specifically the United States (Said 285).

Said proposes three distinct meanings of the term 'Orientalism', which are closely intertwined (2). First, Orientalism used to describe the work of any anthropologist, sociologist, historian, or philologist who studies, writes about, or conducts research on the 'Orient' (2). These academics are known as Orientalists (Said 2). The second meaning of 'Orientalism', which sought a more generalised definition, is Orientalism as a broader school of thought based on the imagined difference between 'the West' and 'the East' (the Other) (Said 2). Said claims that the "mass of writers, among whom are poets, novelists, philosophers, political theorists, economists, and imperial administrators, has accepted the basic distinction between East and West" (Said 2), thus consolidating and reinforcing the Orientalist clichés. To name one of the many Orientalist writers, Rudyard Kipling, the author of *The Jungle Book,* produced a complex narrative of the Orient, its people, its culture, and its mind, which often had nothing to do with the actual people in that region and their lives (Said 6). Third, and perhaps most importantly for Said, 'Orientalism' can be thought of as "a Western strategy for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient" (Said 3). Therefore, Orientalism is viewed as inseparably connected to the colonial history of Europe, enabling the Western world to define itself as a legitimate ruler of the lands it intended to invade and colonise (Said 3).

Furthermore, Edward Said distinguishes between *latent* and *manifest* Orientalism to describe the unconscious views of Orientalists, through art and literature, and the conscious embodiment of those views through physical attitudes and actions toward the Orient. On the one hand, *latent Orientalism* is the set of fixed and unconscious ideas about what the Orient represents in comparison to the West (barbaric, uncivilised, feminine Orient vs. rational, civilised, male Occident) (203-205). On the other hand, *manifest Orientalism* is speaking and acting upon *latent Orientalism*. That is, it is the acting upon the 'Orient' when Westerners have direct contact with it (i.e. colonialism) (203-205). Therefore, the former is mainly found within the world of academia and discourse, while the latter is found in the realms of public policy, commerce, and empire.

As mentioned above, the conception of the Orient is a male conception. Therefore, images of Eastern women are sexualised, exoticised, helpless and under the power of the male

Oriental. This is where intersectionality steps in. Indeed, in America, being an Indian woman is being part of two discriminatory categories: race and gender. Orientalist representations and clichés about Eastern women have tainted and distorted experience in Western societies.

Intersecting Identities

Intersectionality is a structural framework developed by Kimberlé Crenshaw in her article "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color" (1991) that recognises how the experiences of marginalised groups, like women of colour, gays and lesbians, are shaped by the intersection of multiple, interrelated dimensions of identity and oppression (such as race, gender and sexuality) rather than just one dimension alone (1242). The framework challenges the assumption that these dimensions are separate and independent categories and aims to use this intersectional perspective to better understand and address the issues faced by these twice-or-thrice discriminated minorities. The structural framework emphasises that identities and experiences are shaped by overlapping social categories such as race, gender, sexuality and class. Therefore, applying intersectionality to Orientalist representations reveals how these depictions are not monolithic but complex and multifaceted. For instance, Indian women in Western media are often depicted through a lens that combines both their racial and gender identities, leading to a portrayal that is both exoticising and oppressive (Said 207). The intersection of race and gender in these portrayals creates a composite image that reinforces stereotypes of Indian women as either submissive or overly sexualised, fitting into broader Orientalist frameworks.

Consequently, when Edward Said's *Orientalism* posited that Western depictions of the 'Orient' are grounded in colonialist fantasies that portray Eastern societies as exotic, backward, and inherently inferior, he also stressed that these representations would be not just race related but also deeply gendered: latent Orientalism "encouraged a peculiarly (not to say invidiously) male conception of the world" (Said 207). Said claims that it was obvious in works of travellers and novelists, where Oriental women were often depicted as creatures who "expressed unlimited sensuality, [who were] more or less stupid, and above all [who were] willing" (207). Gustave Flaubert, a French author, produced, as Said states, an influential model of the Oriental woman when writing about his encounter with an Egyptian courtesan named Kuchuk Hanem. Said explains that, in Flaubert's description, Kuchuk Hanem "never spoke of herself, she never

represented her emotions, presence or history. *He* spoke for and represented her" (6), thus influencing Orientalist productions about women. This portrayal underlies both scholarly and popular representations of the Orient as a place of feminine passivity and exoticism, contrasted with the masculine rationality of the West (Said 207). Said remarks that the contemporary world, characterised by electronic gadgets, has perpetuated these Orientalist depictions, and television has even manufactured more rigid archetypes that have facilitated the further entrenchment of myths about the Orient (26).

Consequently, the images and representations of Oriental women in Western consciousness has been and continue to be deeply influenced by Orientalist images (Matsumoto 115). In the American media, these Orientalist stereotypes have significant implications. Indian women, as part of both racial minority and female gender minorities, encounter double layers of stereotyping. They are often portrayed through a reductive lens that emphasises their difference from Western norms and reinforces their marginalisation. This representation can contribute to a limited and skewed understanding of their real-life experiences, influencing how they are perceived and treated in Western societies. In the article "Asian American Media Representation: A Film Analysis and Implications for Identity Development" (Besana, Katsiaficas, and Lloyd), the authors analyse how Asian Americans are portrayed in US media, with a particular focus on US films. They distinguish between two types of representation: those that confirm stereotypes (stereotype confirming), and those that resist them (stereotype resisting). These include portrayals of Asian American women as helpless, dependent, servile, docile, and submissive, as well as their frequent casting as heterosexual romantic interests and physically petite characters (219-220). However, the article also notes some instances of stereotype resisting representations, such as female characters with bright-coloured streaks in their hair symbolising rebellion and newfound confidence, or female characters with a slightly larger build than the typical petite Asian female character. In other words, the article puts an emphasis on the lack of diversity of Asian American representation in U.S. media (Besana, Katsiaficas, and Loyd 217-220).

Diversity in American Television

Media Representation and Identity Development

Indian Americans, as part of the broader Asian American minority often referred to as the "model minority", have historically been rendered invisible in American media representation. Unlike their Asian counterparts – East and South-East – South Asian Americans, including Indian Americans, were largely absent from American media until the 2000s (Gupta 43).

Before the 21st century, the representation of Indians in American media was heavily shaped by colonial tropes and Orientalist stereotypes. The first significant Indian presence in Hollywood came with the actor Sabu Dastagir, who portrayed Indian characters in exoticised roles during the 1930s and 1940s. His roles, such as Mowgli in *The Jungle Book*, often featured him wearing loincloths and living in jungles, aligning with Western perceptions of India as a land of savagery, jungles, and human sacrifices. This Orientalist representation was perpetuated during the following decades with films like Steven Spielberg's *The Temple of Doom* (1984). The film revived and reinforced stereotypes of India as an impoverished, dangerous, and exotic place, showcasing narratives constructed through a colonial British lens still influential at that time (Gupta 46).

During Sabu's era, strict immigration restrictions were in place before the 1965's Immigration and Naturalisation Act, which meant that few Indians could enter the United States. This lack of presence translated into limited visibility within American culture, allowing media portrayals to rely on simplistic and demeaning stereotypes, such as belly dancers, tribals, colonial subjects, poor men in turbans, women in saris, and depictions of Indian royalty (Gupta 46). Even after the Immigration and Naturalisation Act of 1965, which increased the Indian American population, the community remained largely invisible in mainstream American culture (Gupta 46). Therefore, American perceptions of Indians relied heavily on British representation of Indians. British television programmes of the 1970s, such as *Mind Your Language,* drew humour from immigrant stereotypes and reinforced colonial attitudes

toward South Asians (Gupta 46). These portrayals presented Indians and other South Asians as comedic, exotic, or out of place, influencing and embedding such biases into American popular culture (Gupta 46). Characters like Apu from *The Simpsons* reinforced these negative caricatures by portraying Indians as malevolent convenience store owners. Indeed, the character of Apu has been a significant figure in discussions about the representation of Indian Americans in the media. Apu, who first appeared in the late 1980s, is portrayed as the owner of a Kwik-E-Mart convenience store. He is known for his thick Indian accent and his unscrupulous management of his convenience store and has a lot of children (Gupta 47). As a result, prior to the 21st century, Indians in American media were predominantly depicted through lenses of exoticism and stereotype, with little recognition of their contributions, diversity, or success. The first film to offer a more nuanced portrayal of Indian American experiences was *Mississippi Masala*, a 1991 Western movie about an Indian family from Uganda that immigrates to the United States (Gupta 47). The film explores the dynamics of a traditional Indian family – father, mother, and daughter – while adding depth through a love story between the daughter and an African American man. This storyline addressed the cultural clash between Indian traditions and American values, as well as the issue of South Asian racism toward African Americans (Gupta 47). However, despite its progressive themes, the film did not mark a significant breakthrough in Indian American representation (Gupta 47). Many of the earlier stereotypes persisted in Hollywood well into the late 20th century, leaving a legacy of reductive portrayals.

Previously depicted as exotic, foreign, or even shaped by British television stereotypes due to limited representation, Indian Americans began to see more nuanced portrayals emerge post-9/11 (Gupta 48). The events of September 11, 2001, marked a turning point in the representation of Indian Americans in American media. Indeed, prior to 9/11, Indian Americans were an invisible minority, with their portrayals in the media largely shaped by colonial influence and Orientalist stereotypes (Gupta 48). However, the aftermath of 9/11 triggered a shift as the community faced widespread discrimination and hate crimes, spurred by heightened scrutiny of individuals perceived as foreign or other (Gupta 48). In response, Indian Americans began asserting their presence in the political and public spheres to combat this prejudice, resulting in increased visibility and a redefinition of their public image. Amit Gupta identifies this societal change as a key factor in altering media portrayals of Indians (48).

A significant media trend contributing to the evolving representation of Indian Americans is the practice of colour-blind casting, where actors are selected for roles regardless of their race or the historical or cultural context of the story. An example of this is Netflix's *Bridgeton*, which breaks from historical racial norms to present a more inclusive and diverse cast (Lynn). For Indian Americans, colour-blind casting has provided opportunities for actors like Aziz Ansari in *Parks and Recreation* and Mindy Kaling in *The Mindy Project*. These roles, where ethnicity is incidental, focus on character development and depth rather than perpetuating stereotypes (Gupta 49). Such portrayals mark progress in diversifying representation. For instance, Kaling's *The Mindy Project* received critical acclaim for spotlighting her experiences as a modern urban woman, emphasising personality and individuality over ethnicity (Gupta 49). Similarly, actors like Sendhil Ramamurthy in *Covert Affairs* and Parminder Nagra in *The Blacklist* have been depicted as competent professionals, moving away from caricatures (Gupta 49). However, progress has been inconsistent. As Amit Gupta notes, for every role that challenges stereotypes, there are characters like Rajesh Ramayan Koothrapalli from *The Big Bang Theory*, who reinforce the trope of the socially awkward hard science nerd (49). Stereotypes persist, particularly in comedies, where Indian American men are often portrayed as intelligent but socially inept, while women are depicted as "exotic and desirable" but stripped of the intelligence associated with their male counterparts (Gupta 50). In other words, while colour-blind casting has allowed for more nuanced portrayals, Indian American characters in mainstream media still face a delicate balance between authenticity and lingering stereotypes.

Furthermore, what is also important to highlight is how media representation significantly impacts identity development among adolescents. In the article "Asian American Media Representation: A Film Analysis and Implications for Identity Development" (Besana, Katsiaficas, and Loyd) the authors explain how media representation shapes minorities, in this case Asian American, self-perception and influences how they are viewed by others. On the one hand, positive representations can provide Asian American youth with role models that reflect their experiences, thereby encouraging healthy ethnic and racial identity (ERI) development (217–220). On the other hand, negative or stereotypical portrayals, such as the perpetual foreigner stereotype or the model minority myth, can lead to feelings of invisibility, low self-esteem, and internalised stereotypes, complicating their identity formation process (Besana, Katsiaficas, and Loyd 203). Moreover, the lack of diverse and authentic representations in the media can hinder their ability to explore and embrace their cultural

identity, while exposure to stereotype-resisting characters can promote positive self-efficacy and a stronger sense of belonging within their ethnic group (Besana, Katsiaficas, and Loyd 217–220). Therefore, the media serves as a critical socialising agent that can either facilitate or impede the identity development of Asian American adolescents, underscoring the importance of more nuanced and accurate portrayals in contemporary media narratives.

The Advent of Streaming Platforms: Netflix's Role in Shaping Multicultural Narratives

Netflix, Inc., founded in 1997 by Reed Hastings and Marc Randolph in Los Gatos, California, has evolved from a DVD rental service to a global streaming platform known for its innovation and commitment to diversity (*Britannica Money*). Initially disrupting the traditional video rental industry, Netflix embraced the changing media landscape by launching its online streaming service in 2007. This strategic pivot not only revolutionised media consumption but also laid the groundwork for Netflix's emergence as a leader in the streaming industry (*Britannica Money*). By 2013, Netflix began producing original content, with its first major releases, such as *House of Cards* and *Narcos* (*Britannica Money*).

Netflix's success can be attributed in large part to its audience-oriented strategies. Unlike traditional Hollywood, which has been criticised for its lack of representation on and off screen – most notably during the #OscarsSoWhite controversy accusing the Oscars of discrimination against artists and creators of colour – and conventional television, Netflix recognised the growing societal demand for diversity and inclusion and has shown it through its communication campaigns (Molina-Guzmàn). Scholars Axelle Asmar, Tim Raats and Leo Van Audenhove, in the article "Streaming difference(s): Netflix and the branding of diversity" (2023), analyse Netflix's press releases and highlights the platform's deliberate efforts to promote diverse stories and employ practices like colour-blind casting, which prioritises character and narrative over rigid racial or cultural preconceptions.

Following this desire to be seen as the leader in diversity content creation, Netflix published, in January 2021, its first diversity report, which included talent from all films and series ordered in the US and produced between 2018 and 2019 (Asmar et al. 24). This commitment to diversity has been framed as part of a broader strategy to justify Netflix's

diversification of content, appealing to a wider audience as it expands globally. Indeed, through strategic communications, Netflix has consistently emphasised its commitment to inclusivity across multiple dimensions, including language, race, gender, and sexuality (Asmar et al. 25). The platform's emphasis on diversity is essential for its transnational growth, as it increasingly operates beyond Western borders and establishes itself as a global provider of television content and services that transcend national boundaries (Asmar et al. 25).

Furthermore, Netflix's storytelling approach reflects its understanding of contemporary audiences and the goal of diversity. The platform proposes a representation strategy aimed at emphasising narratives that resonate with different identities and preferences, thereby appealing to niche audiences while preserving widespread, universal appeal (Asmar et al. 31). Asmar, Raats and Audenhove explain that this strategy fosters Netflix's desire to be seen as the platform "for everyone, regardless of cultural differences" (31). To fulfil this vision, Netflix collaborates extensively with creators and producers around the world, fostering culturally resonant and authentic narratives. This localised approach has been particularly impactful in regions like India and South Korea, where Netflix's investments have yielded content that resonates both regionally and internationally. Notable series and films, celebrated for their ability to bridge cultural divides, have further solidified Netflix's position as a pioneer in inclusive entertainment. For instance, in June 2021 Amazon released its first diversity playbook promising to be more inclusive both on and off screen (Asmar et al. 37). Asmar, Raats and Audenhove argue that Netflix definitely appears as the model to follow (37).

Mindy Kaling: The Voice of an Indian American Woman

Mindy Kaling, or Vera Mindy Chokalingam, is a first-generation born Indian woman that was first made famous by her role of Kelly Kapoor in the sitcom *The Office*. Today, she stands out as a prominent Indian American creator and producer in the United States. By navigating the complex terrain of cultural representation and identity (Forbes; CultursMag), Kaling made her contributions to shows including *Never Have I Ever* and *The Mindy Project* (Forbes; CultursMag). These shows have significantly expanded the representation of South Asian Americans on screen, albeit not without controversy. Her works reflect her unique perspective as a first-generation born Indian American, showcasing her ability to balance the nuances of multiculturalism while challenging existing stereotypes.

Kaling has often focused on placing characters from minority backgrounds at the forefront of her narratives. Speaking about *Never Have I Ever*, she explained, "So many of my fellow nerds in high school were minorities, yet we don't often see them on TV as leads. I wanted to put those typical 'side characters' front and center" (*Indian Express* 2020). This statement demonstrates her intention to dismantle the marginalisation of minority characters, giving South Asian Americans relatable and complex roles.

Kaling's creative approach, however, has sparked criticism and complex debates about identity and representation. Critics have pointed out that her characters often embody what is described as a "coconut" identity –"brown on the outside but white on the inside" (*The Polis Project*) – reflecting broader debates about how Indian Americans navigate dual cultural expectations. This critique connects to larger discussions about identity and assimilation, raising questions about whether Kaling's portrayals reflect an authentic bicultural experience (*The polis Project*). For example, Kaling's protagonists rarely engage deeply with their cultural roots, a choice that some see as an erasure of authentic South Asian experiences. Others argue that this reflects her personal reality as an Indian American navigating multiple cultural identities, highlighting the tension between assimilating into American culture and/or preserving Indian traditions and culture (*CultursMag*).

Another concern is the potential creation of new stereotypes through her work. Some have suggested that Kaling's portrayals – while groundbreaking in placing Indian women at the centre – might inadvertently pigeonhole them into a narrow set of characteristics. Indeed, since she is one of the few producers that give Indian Americans relevant roles, she sets the tone and creates the new standard. For example, her characters are often ambitious, self-deprecating, and romantically flawed, traits that, while entertaining, may not fully capture the diversity of Indian American women's experiences (*UHigh Midway*). This observation highlights the potential limitations in showcasing the diversity of experiences among Indian American women. Moreover, her depiction of Indian culture has been criticised as superficial, raising questions about whether these portrayals truly advance representation or simply offer a palatable version for mainstream audiences.

Never Have I Ever

 Never Have I Ever, created by Mindy Kaling and Lang Fisher, is a coming-of-age Netflix comedy-drama that centres on Devi Vishwakumar, a first-generation Indian American teenager navigating the complexities of high school, family, and cultural identity. Set in Sherman Oaks, California, the series begins with Devi coping with the recent loss of her father, Mohan Vishwakumar, which left her temporarily paralysed from grief.

 The show highlights Devi's struggle to balance her dual cultural identity – being Indian by heritage and American by upbringing – while also dealing with the typical challenges of adolescence. Determined to change her social standing at school, Devi devises a plan to become popular, starting with pursuing her crush, Paxton Hall-Yoshida, a Japanese American student. At home, Devi frequently clashes with her mother, Nalini Vishwakumar, a dermatologist who struggles to connect with her rebellious Americanised daughter while coping with her grief after losing her husband. Living with them is Devi's cousin Kamala, who came to the United States to pursue a Ph.D. in biology while navigating cultural expectations, including accepting an arranged marriage. Joining them at home is Nirmala, Devi's paternal grandmother, who came all the way from India to help Nalini raise Devi. The arrival of Nirmala adds another layer to the family dynamic, as she provides a blend of old-fashioned values and unwavering support for both Devi and Kamala.

 The show aligns with Netflix's ambitions of diversity and excels at portraying multiculturalism through its ensemble cast, showcasing characters from diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds as well as highlighting diversity in terms of sexual orientations, age, and religions. At its core, *Never Have I Ever* challenges the idea of a single cultural norm by emphasising the diversity of its characters. Nalini's journey as a single mother and immigrant, Kamala's navigation of traditional and modern values, and the inclusion of other ethnicities like Aneesa, a Muslim Indian American, and Paxton, a mixed-race character, highlight the importance of embracing and celebrating differences. The show uses its multicultural cast not only to promote acceptance and tolerance but also to create authentic relationships and narratives that resonate across cultural boundaries.

Through its exploration of grief, identity, and self-discovery, *Never Have I Ever* offers a heartfelt yet humorous portrayal of the immigrant experience in a modern context. It centres on multiple themes: grief, adolescence, ethnicity, sexuality, multiculturalism, etc. By weaving together the stories of characters from varied ethnicities and backgrounds, the series underscores the universal struggles of adolescence while celebrating the beauty of cultural diversity.

Cast and Characters

In terms of casting and characters, *Never Have I Ever* offers extensive representation of Indian characters while showcasing the diversity and complexity of multicultural America through colour-blind casting and characters from different ethnic backgrounds and sexual orientations. For example, Alexandra Billings, a transgender actress, plays the role of Jennifer Garner, the school career counsellor. As for diversity among the characters, the show features individuals from various ethnic and religious backgrounds, such as Fabiola, an African American girl; Paxton Hall-Yoshida, who is half-American and half-Japanese; or Ben Gross, who is Jewish.

As for Indian Americans, the show provides a wide-ranging portrayal of the Indian diaspora, capturing the experiences of first-generation Indian Americans across various age groups as well as those of both older and more recent Indian immigrants.

Devi Vishwakumar, the protagonist played by Maitreyi Ramakrishnan, is a first generation-born Indian American. As the daughter of Mohan Vishwakumar and Nalini Vishwakumar, she tries to navigate between her cultural heritage and the culture she was brought up in. She represents the Americanised Indian trying to dissociate from her heritage in order to fit in. Her parents have very different acculturation styles – a process by which individuals adapt to a new culture, potentially preserving aspects of their original culture. These different acculturation styles have created different dynamics between Devi and her father and mother, respectively. We will later explore how they have led to conflict within the family and nourished a lack of coherence in Devi's ethnic identity.

Nalini Vishwakumar, Devi's mother, is the stereotypical Indian mother – strict and religious. In terms of stereotypes, she fits into the model minority stereotype, as she is a

successful dermatologist who managed to study while raising a daughter. As mentioned above, her acculturation style is different from her husband's. She has always felt foreign to the United States; she is the "expatriate Indian" that Mishra describes, unwilling to let her identity evolve and wishing she could return home. Her husband, Mohan, on the other hand, is the "immigrant American" who embraces change and feels at peace with the evolution of his identity.

Kamala, Devi's cousin, represents the perspective of recent immigrants. Born in India and having moved to the United States to pursue a PhD, she provides insight into the experiences of the younger generation immigrating for educational opportunities. Kamala's storyline also highlights the challenges faced by Indian women of her age, such as navigating the expectations of arranged marriage and the judgment of elderly people. She finds herself torn between honouring her cultural heritage, meeting the expectations of her family, and pursuing her own desires and aspirations.

Nirmala, Devi's paternal grandmother, joins the household when Nalini, Devi's mother, decides against returning to India to raise Devi in an Indian cultural environment. Instead, Nirmala brings India to them, preserving traditions and providing a link to their heritage while adding complexity to the family dynamics.

Mr. Kulkarni, or Manish, Devi's teacher, represents an older, first-generation Indian immigrant. Unlike others in the series, he has fully assimilated into American culture, neither speaking an Indian language nor adhering to Indian religious practices. In many ways, he represents an older version of Devi. His relationship with Kamala later in the series creates humorous and tense moments, particularly due to Nirmala's disapproval of him for not being Indian enough.

Other Indian characters add further depth to the show's portrayal of the diaspora. Aneesa, a new student at Devi's school, provides insight into the diversity within the Indian immigrant community, as she is a Muslim Indian. Over time, the show adds complexity to her character by revealing her struggles with her sexuality, as she identifies as homosexual. Another example is Des, the son of Nalini's friend, who subverts the stereotype of the "Indian nerd" by being both intelligent and charismatic. Similarly, Kamala's fiancé, Prashant, offers another perspective on the typical representations of Indian men in U.S. media.

The Indian diaspora, which includes the migration and displacement of Indians during the colonial period, remains understudied in the show. This includes the indenture system, in which Indians were sent to British colonies under 'work' contracts but were used to replace slavery with another new legal system. These migrations represent a rich and historically significant part of the diaspora that is missing from the series. The programme exclusively features Indians who have immigrated directly from India or were born in the United States, overlooking the complex histories and cultural identities of the older segment of the Indian diaspora.

Cultural Conformity and Netflix's Vision of Diversity

Devi, without realising it, follows the principles of the melting pot metaphor, which shaped much of 20th-century American ideology about immigration and continues to resonate in contemporary society. As a reminder, the melting pot metaphor envisions the fusion of diverse ethnic identities into a single, unified American identity. However, the criticism of this metaphor lies in its prioritisation of a dominant cultural standard, rooted in white, Christian, and European heritage, while marginalising the richness and vibrancy of multicultural contributions that define the American landscape. In the show, this tension between assimilation – that conforms to the dominant standard – and self-identity is portrayed through Devi's character and how she is yearning to be perceived as a normal American teenager. According to Devi's imagination, being a normal American teenager is participating in the dominant culture and melting into it:

> One: I'd like to be invited to a party with alcohol and hard drugs. I'm not gonna do them. I'd just like the opportunity to say: 'No cocaine for me, thanks, I'm good.' Two: I'd love for my arm hair to thin out. I know it's an Indian thing, but my forearms look like the frigging floor of a barber shop. And lastly, most importantly, I'd really, really like a boyfriend, but not some nerd from one of my AP classes. Like a guy from sports team. He can be dumb. I don't care. I just want him to be a stone-cold hottie, who could rock me all night long. ("Pilot" 0:30)

These wishes Devi makes on her first day of school to Hindu god Krishna demonstrate her preoccupation with conforming to the dominant American cultural ideal. In her perception of normality, she understands that she can achieve social acceptance through going to parties, relationships ("I'd really, really like a boyfriend"), and physical traits that are not "Indian thing[s]". This reflects her belief that fulfilling these typical teenage experiences – having a

boyfriend, conforming to Western beauty standards, and attending parties – will help her climb the social ladder and finally be popular. This desire comes to a head later in the same episode when Devi boldly asks Paxton Hall-Yoshida, the most popular and attractive boy in school, to have sex with her ("Pilot" 25:00). This scene is less about romantic or emotional connection and more about Devi's need to validate herself through social milestones. She views losing her virginity – particularly to someone as admired as Paxton – and having a boyfriend who is hot, yet can sometimes act dumb, to achieve legitimacy within her school's social hierarchy.

Furthermore, Devi's preoccupation with her appearance, which reflects her belief that normalcy aligns with conformity to the dominant American teenage archetype, a result of the Melting Pot ideal, is reinforced later in the episode when she speaks with her therapist: 'It doesn't matter how it makes me feel. It matters how it makes me look […] Normal. I just want to be a normal girl who isn't called mean names, and could actually have a boyfriend" ("Pilot": 23:13). Devi explicitly articulates her desire to look normal, showcasing an internalisation of the Melting Pot metaphor and the desire to fit in an American mould. These examples lay the foundations for Devi's stance on her identity. This foundation will help understand the unravelling of Devi's identity conflict in the rest of the analysis.

As for the other metaphor discussed in the theoretical part, the Salad Bowl metaphor – a model emphasising cultural retention and coexistence within a multicultural society – is represented in the show through the diversity of characters and their personal stories. The show's environment serves as a microcosm of multicultural American society, with students from various minority backgrounds, such as Jewish (Ben Gross), Muslim (Aneesa), Black (Dr Jackson), Asian (Steve), and white (Eric Perkins). Indeed, the show not only showcases diverse characters but also gives them a story to tell. For instance, the episode "…Opened a Text Book" follows Paxton's point of view and gives the chance to learn about the Japanese concentration camp in America, since Paxton is half American and half Japanese. Other characters in the show have side stories, such as Fabiola making her coming-out to her mother in the episode "... Been a Big, Fat Liar".

This diverse representation aligns with Netflix's broader strategic commitment to inclusivity and diversity that not only seeks to mirror the multicultural reality of its audiences but also resonates with its brand positioning as a global leader in inclusive storytelling (Asmar

et al.). By presenting authentic and varied narratives, Netflix reaffirms its role in promoting stories that reflect cultural retention rather than assimilation, which is at the core of the Salad Bowl ideal. This commitment to inclusivity in the show not only enriches storytelling but also serves Netflix's diversity aspirations, solidifying its role as a pioneer in creating culturally resonant content.

Furthermore, the show does not idealise or flattens the portrayal of the multicultural American context and demonstrates instances of negative aspects. For example, in a flashback, Mohan comforts Nalini for being mocked when bringing Indian food to Devi's school gathering, "you should have seen their faces when I put my korma down at the potluck. They treat me like I'm nothing. They always act like they can't understand my accent. They treat me like I'm a child" ("…Been Slut Shamed 8:07). This flashback helps to give more nuance to the portrayal of multicultural America. The show depicts an accurate portrayal of a multicultural America by addressing the negative and discriminatory remarks people of minority communities can face. This idea is also reinforced by Paxton Hall-Yoshida's adopted sister – Rebecca – who has Down's Syndrome and whom Paxton is afraid of showing because of the teasing he and his sister can get "I'm just kind of protective of my sister. She used to get bullied pretty bad…even by people I thought were my friends." ("…Gotten Drunk With the Popular Kids" 27:13).

Navigating the Hyphen

Devi's character exemplifies the complexities of the hyphenated identity of first-generation born Indian Americans. Born in California to Indian immigrant parents, Devi reflects the journey shared by many children of immigrants, i.e. navigating the space between two cultures while attempting to forge an identity that reconciles these competing forces. The series establishes Devi's role as a culturally ambivalent character within her family. Indeed, as the narrator, John McEnroe, recounts the Vishwakumar family's immigration to the United States in September 2001, a moment fraught with heightened racial tensions and Islamophobia, therefore "not a super chill time to be a brown person in America" ("Pilot" 1:45). Devi is depicted differently than her parents. Despite her parents' efforts to maintain their Indian roots, Devi is shown leaning toward assimilation, adopting an "all-American" identity that contrasts with her family's cultural practices. The narrator captures this contrast: "While he [her father]

and her mother stayed true to their Indian roots […] Devi was all-American" ("Pilot" 2:02). In the show, this dichotomy is accompanied by a scene where Nalini and Mohan stay true to Hindu vegetarianism by refusing meat at a barbecue: "No, no, no, thank you. We are vegetarians" ("Pilot" 2:00). Meanwhile, Devi is shown seated, already enjoying her meat. This visual juxtaposition in the first episode of the show serves as an early indication of Devi's cultural differences from her parents and her inclination toward American norms over Indian traditions.

As stated in the previous part, Devi's lenience and desire to fit into mainstream American culture reveal her attitude towards her Indian heritage and how she feels about her Indianness – the social, cultural, and spiritual perception or sentiment of being an Indian (*Collins*). In the show, her character is often depicted in contradiction with Indian symbols and culture. In the episode centred around Ganesh Puja – a Hindu holiday celebrating Lord Ganesh – Devi's reluctance and irritation to wearing a sari illustrate her discomfort with embracing outward expressions of her Indian identity ("…Felt Super Indian" 0:40). She complains to her mother: "The sari is so uncomfortable. Why does it itch so much?" ("…Felt Super Indian" 2:46). Nalini's response, framing the sari as a "rite of passage for Indian women", reflects her belief in the importance of preserving cultural rituals as well as showing to Devi the importance of saris in Indian culture. Devi, however, dismisses this significance, arguing for the practicality of wearing jeans and a kurta instead: "At least then I don't have to get half-naked every time I need to go to the bathroom" (2:46). Nalini's sarcastic remark about Devi's preference for "ripped jeans and a 'fries before guys' T-shirt" further emphasises Devi's preference for American culture and Devi's desire to distance herself from these markers of tradition.

Furthermore, Devi's reluctance to cultural symbols extends beyond attire to her perception of Indian traditions. During the Ganesh Puja celebration, she observes a group of Indian girls performing a traditional Bollywood dance and mockingly remarks to the girl beside her, "They seem cool here [at Ganesh Puja], but can you imagine how dorky they would look doing this anywhere else?" ("…Felt Super Indian" 6:30). Devi's critique reveals her internalised embarrassment regarding her heritage. Her comment establishes her belief that Indian practices, while acceptable in a culturally specific setting, lack value in broader, predominantly Western spaces. Moreover, it reveals Devi's internalised belief that cultural differences are inherently embarrassing, leading her to feel pressured to downplay her heritage

in order to align with the dominant American narrative, which she perceives as incompatible with Indian traditions. However, Devi is challenged in her attitude towards her Indianness when the girl next to her replies proudly, "that's my sister Preethi. Her Bollywood dance group was in the Macy's day parade on a float sponsored by Ziploc. So, who looks dorky now" ("…Felt Super Indian" 6:47). She does not feel at ease expressing her Indian identity, whereas others take pride in showcasing their culture. This feeling is reinforced by the narrator, "even though Devi was Indian, she didn't think of herself as Indian Indian like these girls, which is a whole other thing" ("…Felt Super Indian" 6:30). This interaction highlights Devi's internalised embarrassment about her culture.

Additionally, still in the same episode, her attitude is further challenged by her interaction with Harish, an older Indian friend who used to feel similarly to Devi towards his Indianness. Devi questions Harish about his presence at Ganesh Puja because he left for college and should not be here like Devi is. However, he admits that even though he once felt similarly, he underwent a change in college:

> DEVI. Why are you at this lame fest? Shouldn't you be at Stanford like playing frisbee with a computer?
>
> HARISH. Actually, I really wanted to come.
>
> DEVI. To Ganesh puja? at a public high school in the valley? are you insane? Tell me the truth they send you home on medical leave? Are you suicidal from Accutane?
>
> HARISH. No, look, I know I used to clown on this every year, but the truth is kind of miss *puja*.
>
> DEVI. Are you kidding? When I get into Princeton, I'm never coming back. I'm going to be an atheist who eats cheeseburgers every day with my white boyfriend.
>
> HARISH. I thought I'd be that way too, but it was different when I went to college. My roommate, Nick, is Native American, and he's so into being Native American. At first, I was like you're away from your parents you don't have to pretend to care about your ancestry or whatever, but then he took me to their campus powwow. No one was standing in the corner making fun of it. They were dancing and chanting, and having a great time, and it made me think, why do I think it's so weird and embarrassing to be Indian?
>
> DEVI. Where do I start? How about every single thing my mom has ever said and done.
>
> HARISH. I just thought, am I gonna be this insecure Indian guy who hates doing Indian things? Because that's its own identity. It's just a shitty one.

DEVI. Well, that's definitely not my identity. I love being Indian.

THE NARRATOR. "Real convincing, Devi. I look more comfortable being Indian." (7:12)

Devi's interaction with Harish begins with her characteristic sarcasm and cynicism, reflecting her discomfort with Indian cultural events. When she asks Harish, "Why are you at this lame fest? Shouldn't you be at Stanford like playing frisbee with a computer?" she diminishes the significance of Ganesh Puja. The phrase "lame fest" underscores Devi's perception of the event as irrelevant in an American context, further illustrating her embarrassment about Indian traditions. Her incredulity deepens as she jokingly questions Harish's mental health, asking if he was sent home on "medical leave" or if he was "suicidal from Accutane." These remarks expose Devi's inability to fathom why someone like Harish – someone like her – would willingly engage with their heritage willingly.

Harish's response, however, offers a contrast to Devi's cynicism. He candidly admits that he once shared her dismissive attitude: "I know I used to clown on this every year, but the truth is I kind of miss Puja." His use of "clown" acknowledges his prior rejection of Indian traditions, while the phrase "kind of miss" suggests a growing appreciation for these rituals, particularly after leaving home. Harish's perspective has evolved, and his newfound connection to Ganesh Puja reflects a broader shift in his understanding of identity and belonging as an Indian American. Harish elaborates on his evolution by recounting his experience with his Native American roommate at Stanford by witnessing a celebration where no one was "standing in the corner making fun of it". Instead, participants "were dancing and chanting, and having a great time", which made Harish reflect on why he finds Indian traditions "so weird and embarrassing". His roommate's pride in his heritage served as a mirror for Harish, prompting him to reevaluate his own attitudes. This moment represents a turning point not only for Harish but also for Devi, who feels personally targeted by Harish's reflection.

Devi, however, deflects Harish's introspection with humour, shifting the focus to her mother's overbearing nature: "Where do I start? How about every single thing my mom has ever said and done." While this response partially reflects the tension between Devi and Nalini – a subject addressed later in this paper – it also serves as a defence mechanism, allowing Devi to avoid confronting her own internalised biases. Harish counters Devi's deflection with a

poignant observation: "Am I gonna be this insecure Indian guy who hates doing Indian things? Because that's its own identity. It's just a shitty one." This statement encapsulates the broader struggle for the hyphenated identity, a concept that resonates deeply with immigrant experiences. As a reminder, the term hyphenated identity refers to the complex duality immigrants face, navigating between their heritage and their new national identity. Harish's use of "shitty" underscores the inadequacy of rejecting cultural roots, echoing early societal perceptions of hyphenated identities as incomplete or fractured. Historically, figures like President Woodrow Wilson and Theodore Roosevelt criticised hyphenated Americans for their perceived divided loyalties, reflecting the dominant Melting Pot ideal that demanded assimilation over cultural pluralism.

Harish's remark, however, also suggests a more contemporary understanding of hyphenated identities – one that emphasises reconciliation with the herited culture over rejection. As the 20th century progressed, many individuals reclaimed the hyphen as a symbol of pride, viewing it as a way to honour their heritage while navigating life in a new country. This reclamation mirrors Harish's journey towards cultural acceptance and pride, offering a contrast to Devi's reluctance. Moreover, Devi's half-hearted response–"Well, that's definitely not my identity. I love being Indian" – is undercut by the narrator's humour: "Real convincing, Devi. I look more comfortable being Indian." This commentary reveals the gap between Devi's words and her true feelings, highlighting her ongoing struggle with internalised shame and cultural disconnection. Her hesitation reflects a tension inherent in hyphenated identities: the pressure to conform to the dominant culture while grappling with the expectations of one's heritage. In other words, the conversation between Devi and Harish encapsulates the divergent paths hyphenated identities can take, balancing cultural pride with internalised shame. While both characters initially dismissed Indian celebrations as a "lame fest", reflecting a shared alienation from their heritage, Harish's evolution toward embracing his identity provides a contrast to Devi's dismissive attitude. This contrast underscores the generational and experiential nuances in the journey of hyphenated identities.

The introduction of Aneesa in season two, another Indian student, adds further complexity to Devi's identity struggles. Aneesa serves as both a foil and a mirror for Devi, illustrating the varied experiences within the same diaspora. While Devi embodies the tension and insecurity of a hyphenated identity, often caught between her Indian heritage and her desire

to assimilate into a predominantly white culture, Aneesa appears to have found balance. Aneesa is socially well integrated "yeah, right. Aneesa's like Devi 2.0. No offense Devi 1.0." ("…Had an Indian Frenemy" 1:56), exuding confidence and exhibiting no need to justify or conceal her origins "yeah, I'm Muslim" ("…Had an Indian Frenemy" 1:33). This stark contrast underscores Devi's impulsive behaviour and her lack of confidence: "I get a self-hating Indian vibe from her. I bet she doesn't have any Indian friends" ("…Had an Indian Frenemy" 2:59), which ironically is Devi's case, as her friend makes her notice, "Neither do you." (3:05). This attitude towards the arrival of Aneesa, another Indian kid, betrays a deeper insecurity about Devi's identity. Indeed, Devi had always assumed that her unpopularity was because of her race, the narrator states: "She had always assumed her unpopularity was because of racism, but this new kid was proving that Devi might just be objectively lame" ("…Had an Indian Frenemy" 1:20), so the arrival of Aneesa, who was cool and Indian, sparkles Devi's jealousy. Indeed, Aneesa represents an idealised version of herself: "as David prepared for the sleepover, she promised herself she would be on her best behavior with Aneesa maybe she was overreacting it's not like Aneesa was actually perfect" ("…Had an Indian Frenemy" 9:40). Someone, unlike Devi, who can comfortably navigate both cultural spheres without struggles. Later in the episode, Aneesa is invited to Devi's house, she brought with her a Ferrero Rocher pyramid, which the narrator commented, "For Indian people that's the Rolex of confection gift boxes" (9:54). Devi is visibly annoyed by Aneesa's ability to navigate both worlds: at home –"in her 15 years Devi had never seen one of her friends greet her family the way her family wanted to be greeted" (10:30) – and at school – "Devi was in awe of this cool Indian teen" (1:15). Thus, Aneesa's presence challenges Devi to reconsider her approach to her identity, leaving her with questions about how she navigates her hyphenated identity by comparing with Aneesa's ease of navigating in both worlds.

Acculturation and Intergenerational Dynamics

In the theoretical part, the causal link between the type of acculturation – the process by which individuals adapt to a new culture while possibly retaining aspects of their original culture – of the parents and the relational dynamics between adolescents and their parents was mentioned. The different types of acculturations of Devi's parents, Nalini and Mohan, have repercussions on the education given and, consequently, on the dynamics of the relationship between the parent and Devi.

Nalini represents the 'expatriate Indian'-an individual who identifies as Indian while residing in America, maintaining and perpetuating a singular Indian identity, and continually longs to return, a notion addressed by Mishra in the theoretical part. Indeed, in the show, it is made clear that Nalini had no desire to leave India "America was Mohan's dream, not mine. I went because I loved him, and because I liked the idea of no power outages." ("…Thrown a Rager" 11:55). Like the 'expatriate Indian', Nalini also has a desire to return to her homeland. At the end of season one, Devi learns that her mother was preparing, in secret, for their return to India, "Oh my God you want us to move to India" ("…Had To Be on My Best Behavior" 21:00) because Nalini "feel[s] like a stranger here" (21:15). Nalini feels that raising her daughter according to her principles and values is not possible in the United States "It'll be a big change but I think we need it […]I don't have a support system and frankly without your father around I just feel like I'm really struggling to raise you" ("…Had To Be on My Best Behavior" 21:15). Like Mukherjee's sister, Nalini embodies the 'expatriate Indian, who chooses to maintain and perpetuate her cultural heritage and feels like an Indian living in the US. It was for Mohan's sake and out of love for him that she moved to and stayed in the US. Now that he is gone, Nalini sees no reason not to return to India, and this perspective seems logical to her. Especially as Devi is getting increasingly difficult to manage, she is drinking, going out with boys, insulting her mother, "Mom, you're being such a bitch!" ("…Had Sex With Paxton Hall-Yoshida" 11:54), and misbehaving in general. As a result, Nalini decides to return to India to give Devi an Indian-style education, as she has come to know it.

Furthermore, Mishra observes that with the 'expatriate Indian' comes along a desire to return to their homeland, a homeland that, in reality, only exists in their memories. However, Nalini's return to India was inconclusive, as she found that in her absence everything had changed, including herself. When arriving at her parents' Nalini was not welcomed, as she thought she would be, her mother had forgotten her arrival and was getting ready to go to a wedding, "I love you and Devi, but I also value my social life. It's feminist!" ("…Thrown a Rager" 5:50). Nalini has also changed for India, indeed, her mother asks her why she wants to work when moving back to India and because "at your [Nalini's] age, maybe it's time to be a little less aspirational. Self-care is also feminist. I read that on goop" (5:60). Her aspirations seem to be westernised for her mother. Moreover, it is confirmed that Nalini does not fit into Indian culture any more when she is confronted by her mother-in-law Nirmala:

NIRMALA. No, you can't move here.

NALINI. I thought you love having me here.

NIRMALA. I love having you here, but you are too westernized now.

NALINI. I'm not too westernized, mami.

NIRMALA. I saw you reach for the seatbelt in the car. It was quite insulting to the driver. Also what would Mohan think?

NALINI. America was Mohan's dream, not mine. I went because I loved him, and because I liked the idea of no power outages.

NIRMALA. Maybe you didn't want it at first, but what about now? What about your practice?

NALINI. Mami, I need to move here."

("…Thrown a Rager" 11:55)

Nalini is convinced that the right thing to do is to go back to what she calls 'home', when in reality, she does not fit into this 'new' India because the India she left behind no longer exists. It was when she was confronted with her parents presenting her a potential husband, an old man who happened to be the groom's grandfather of the wedding they went to the day before. This was Nalini's final straw that made her realise, "you're right I can't move back to India. While I really loved my visit, it just doesn't fit like it used to" ("…Thrown a Rager" 25:00). And instead made Nirmala move to the US, allowing "a little bit of India" to move with them. This part of the show echoes one of the basics of the diaspora theory, i.e. perpetuating the myths and memories of the homeland, a country of origin who no longer exists except in the memories of those who left it.

Consequently, what characterises the 'expatriate Indian' figures is its separatist acculturation style. As a matter of fact, Nalini has a separatist acculturation style, meaning that she rejects the culture of the host country in order to maintain her culture of origin. Since her arrival in the United States, Nalini has made it a point of honour to establish and perpetuate Indian traditions at home, forcing Devi to attend Indian religious and cultural celebrations such as Ganesh Puja, or by promoting Indian values and education. For example, when Devi goes to visit a friend at his house for a school project, Nalini forces her to bring something to her friends because "No child of mine shall go to someone's house in the evening without taking a delicious box of confections for the parents" ("…Gotten Drunk With the Popular Kids" 17:34). Devi

protests by saying that "No one in America does that, mom" (17:40). Or, also, when Nalini refuses and forbids Devi to have a boyfriend, "Devi is forbidden from dating until she is old enough to rent a car" (…Been a Big, Fat Liar 14:30).

Another aspect that defines the separatist acculturation style is the rejection of the host culture. In Nalini's character, this feature is reflected by her constant criticism of American culture. She constantly points out its flaws and believes she is not a part of it:

> Apparently, American workplaces need fun perks to keep the employees interested in earning a paycheck. (…Pissed Off Everyone I Know 13:19)

> This is why the American school system is failing. Because everybody is treated like they're special when most of them should just drop out and learn a trade. ("…Gotten Drunk With the Popular Kids" 17:20)

> So, how's your useless trash picking day? I love that I pay taxes to send you to school to do another thing I pay taxes for. ("…Been a Playa" 24:44)

> Nalini had completely forgotten about Valentine's Day. She had always considered it a stupid holiday. ("…Had a Valentine" 5:15)

This style of acculturation in a parent tends to create family stress and conflict between the child and the parent, especially when the child and the parent have an acculturation gap – the child adapts more rapidly to the host culture than the parent – as is the case between Devi and Nalini. Indeed, the relationship between Devi and her mother is highly conflictual. Even before Mohan's death, in the flashback to the night of his death, Nalini and Devi were arguing because Nalini felt that Devi was not serious enough, not concentrated enough, because she had lost her music sheet before her cello concert ("…Had to Be on My Best Behavior"). This scene reveals that the conflicts were in place long before Mohan's passing, thus, establishing that the conflicts between Devi and her mother are not the results of their grief but rather of an acculturation gap. The four seasons of the show are characterised by these conflicts between the mother and the daughter arising from their cultural differences:

> Itchiness of sari is the rite of passage for Indian women deal with it. […] Lord Ganesh doesn't need to see my daughter in ripped jeans and 'a fries before guys' T-shirt. " ("…Felt Super Indian" 2:46)

> Devi, for once can you please try not to make my life any harder? ("…Had to Be on My Best Behavior" 4:10)

> I let you take charge of your own college process because for some strange reason, I thought you'd be sensible. What were you thinking only applying to Ivies? I mean, how could you be so stupid? (…Gone to Prom 24:10)

The conflicts typically reside in the fact that Devi wants to prioritise an American-style adolescence, i.e. becoming popular, going out with boys, going to parties, etc. Whereas Nalini, on the other hand, wants her daughter to have an Indian tradition infused upbringing, motivated by academic success, strict education and without boys, "You are not to have any sexual contact with boys, even in the lies you tell" ("… Been a Big Fat Liar" 16:07).

Conversely, Mohan embodies what Mishra calls an 'immigrant American'. As a reminder, the 'immigrant American' is the figure that overcomes the loss of the homeland and who is not afraid of the transformation and evolution of its identity in a new cultural context. For the 'immigrant American' identity is dynamic, fluid, and open to change. In the flashbacks shown in the series, Mohan presents a larger comprehension and acceptance of American culture than his wife Nalini. Indeed, it was Mohan's desire to emigrate to the US ("…Thrown a Rager"); therefore, he willingly embraced the opportunity to bridge Indian traditions with American culture. His attitude toward American culture and his adaptability to his new host country are evident in instances such as when, upon purchasing their first home – the house in which Devi grew up—Mohan heard a song playing from the real estate agent's car *Beautiful Day* by U2 and it instantly became his favourite "This is my new favourite song" ("…Said I'm Sorry" 6:50). Later in the same episode, the song was played again by Nalini during the ceremony of spreading Mohan's ashes in Malibu after reciting a prayer in Sanskrit. Moreover, Nalini's decision to spread Mohan's ashes, a ceremony that takes place just before their planned move to India, in America–"I want to take him somewhere he loves" ("…Said I'm Sorry" 20:20) – rather than in India, reveals Mohan's deep attachment to America. The 'immigrant American' allows for fluidity and adaptation of identity in the new cultural context. Mohan is open to change and evolution, for example, when Nalini sends him to buy a second car for them, Mohan returns with a moped because he received "other instructions…from California" ("…Had Sex With Paxton Hall-Yoshida" 6:23). However, he does not forget to bridge both cultures; therefore, later he reassures Nalini, "there is nothing to worry about, my love! I had the bike blessed at the temple" (16:12). In other words, all the examples mentioned, even though they are conveyed through flashbacks, depict a Mohan who was curious and happy to let his identity evolve in an American context. His attitude matches Mishra's interpretation of the

'immigrant American' who surpasses the loss of its homeland and embraces the transformation and evolution of its identity. Consequently, Mohan's acculturation style can be described as integrationist, i.e. he maintains significant aspects of his Indian heritage while adopting and incorporating elements of American culture.

This approach to acculturation has profound implications for his relationship with his daughter, Devi. As a parent, Mohan's open-mindedness helped his understanding and support of Devi's dual identity as a first generation-born Indian American. Unlike Nalini, who often struggles to reconcile Devi's Americanness with her own traditional values, Mohan acts as a bridge between the two cultures. This dynamic is evident in Mohan's ability to mediate between Devi and Nalini, particularly during moments of conflict. On the night of his death, for instance, Mohan intervenes during the argument between Devi and Nalini. While Nalini reacts to Devi's perceived defiance with strictness and frustration, Mohan adopts a conciliatory approach, "so, let's stop yelling at each other and look for the sheet music together, and when we come home later, I will fix this" ("… Had to Be on My Best Behavior" 10:00). Mohan's words reflect his role as a peacemaker and a parent who prioritises harmony and understanding. This memory becomes a defining moment for Devi, who later describes her father as "the only parent that actually cared about me" ("… Had to Be on My Best Behavior" 22:50). Devi's perception of her father as her sole ally underscores the contrast between Mohan's integrative approach to acculturation and Nalini's more rigid adherence to tradition, leaving Devi with the feeling of "I'm just a burden to you" ("… Had to Be on My Best Behavior" 22:35) with her mother. His approach stands in contrast to that of her mother, Nalini, who embodies a separationist style, maintaining a strong connection to Indian traditions while resisting significant adaptation to American norms. Nalini's adherence to cultural expectations often places her in conflict with Devi, who predominantly leans toward assimilation into the dominant American culture. However, Nalini's acculturation style evolves over the course of the season, and gradually opens up to concepts she did not previously accept, such as becoming more accepting of Devi's dating life, "Even though I won't let you date, I do care if you're heartbroken" ("…Had a Valentine" 28:55). In other words, this divergence creates a complex environment for Devi, who must navigate between the rigid expectations of her mother and the more flexible perspective she inherited from her father.

As a result, the acculturation styles of Devi's parents play a significant role in shaping her ethnic identity, influencing how she navigates between her Indian heritage and her Americanness. As highlighted in the theoretical section on acculturation, communication issues and misunderstandings often arise when parents and children adhere to different acculturation styles, leading to conflict within the family and complicating the child's identity formation. Moreover, children of parents with an integrated or assimilated acculturation style are more likely to develop a positive ethnic identity. Whereas parents who have a marginalised or separated acculturation style cause more stress and conflict in the family. These dynamics are evident in the show through Devi's struggles to reconcile with her hyphenated identity, particularly after the death of her father, whose integrationist approach provided a bridge between her Indian heritage and her American life.

Consequently, throughout the series, Devi's acculturation style reflects her assimilationist tendencies. She distances herself from Indian traditions, opting for a more negative attitude towards her ethnic identity and aligns more closely with mainstream American norms, as seen in her preferences for American pop culture, food, and clothing:

> I'll get a tattoo of his name under my boobs like Rihanna ("…Been a Playa" 6:29).

> Can't you just make pizza rolls or something [instead of pani puri]? ("…Had an Indian Frenemy" 10:51).

Similarly, Devi favours casual American clothing, such as jeans and T-shirts, over traditional Indian attire, even in contexts where both would be appropriate. These choices underscore her alignment with mainstream American norms. At the same time, Devi struggles to feel legitimate within her ethnic community, often perceiving herself as an outsider.

This tension is particularly evident during the Ganesh Puja celebration, where her discomfort with Indian traditions and her sense of alienation come to the forefront. From the episode's opening scenes, Devi exhibits a clear rejection of Indian cultural practices. She is visibly annoyed to go to Ganesh Puja, particularly when her cousin Kamala dresses her in a sari – a garment Devi neither knows how to wear nor feels comfortable in. Devi explicitly communicates her discomfort in embracing her culture in an American context later in the episode. She admits to a barista, "I don't really feel at home right now in my choice of clothing.

I mean, usually I don't, but especially today" ("…Felt Super Indian" 1:45). Devi's remarks reveal her deeper struggle with cultural belonging. While her attire visibly marks her as Indian, she does not feel comfortable embracing this identity. This discomfort is exacerbated by the fact that the celebration takes place at her school – a space that typically represents her sense of being American. It is as if her home, where Indian traditions must be strictly observed, has merged with her American life, symbolised by her school. This blending of cultural spheres leaves Devi feeling uneasy and out of place. The narrator expresses that, "even though Devi was Indian, she didn't think of herself as Indian 'Indian' like these girls, which is a whole other thing, so sometimes she felt a little out of place" ("… Felt Super Indian" 6:30). Devi's struggle is not limited to her appearance but extends to her feelings of belonging within the Indian community. This sense of alienation reflects her internalised belief that Indian traditions are incompatible with the Americanised version of herself that she aspires to embody. Devi's sense of not belonging to either world – Indian or American – culminates in a vulnerable moment at the end of the episode. After a conversation with a college counsellor, she breaks down and confides in her friend Paxton she encounters in the hallway of the school during Ganesh Puja "some old loser was telling me that I'm too Indian, and some other people think I'm not Indian enough. And honestly, all I want to do is eat a doughnut, but I'm stuck here" ("… Felt Super Indian" 18:10). This dual rejection, both by her Indian community and by those who expect her to conform to American norms, leaves Devi in an ambiguous space where she struggles to feel at home, in either world, reflecting the consequences of acculturation gaps between parents and children, resulting in a lack of coherence in her ethnic identity.

As the show progresses and that Nalini – her only parent – demonstrates an increasingly less separationist acculturation style, Devi's attitude towards her ethnic identity evolves. She transitions from an assimilationist approach – desiring to fit into an American norm – to a more integrative one – opening herself to her culture and feeling less ashamed of embracing it in front of her American peers. For instance, in the last episode of the show, Devi is happy that her grandmother has invited all of her friends to her Indian wedding:

> NIRMALA. Why don't you all come to my wedding? We could use some more attractive young people. Who's your handsome friend? Uh, what's his name? Carfax?
> DEVI. Paxton.
> NIRMALA. Bring him too. I'd love to see his face in my wedding album.
> DEVI. Thank you so much, Pati!
> ("…Said Goodbye" 5:54)

Now, she feels comfortable to mix the two worlds she was afraid to mix in the former seasons, as seen when she claims, "Why does the Hindu Association have to have puja at my high school?" ("…Felt Super Indian" 3:35) fearing that she will see someone from her school. In this last episode, which concludes the show, she even proudly performs a Bollywood dance for her grandmother with her cousin Kamala in front of all her friends and friends' boyfriends and girlfriends. This evolution reflects the challenge and potential of navigating a hyphenated identity. Devi's journey illustrates that identity formation within the diaspora is not monolithic, but a dynamic process shaped by familial influences, personal insecurities, and interactions with others. For Devi, this journey involves rejecting, re-examining, and ultimately embracing aspects of her heritage, allowing her to redefine what it means to be Indian American on her own terms.

Representations and Stereotypes: Confirming or Resisting?

In the theoretical section, I outlined the various stereotypes and myths about the Indian minority in the US as well as how these are represented in the media. This includes an exploration of the model minority myth, which emphasises academic and professional success, the Orientalist myths that often reduce Indian women to exotic or traditional archetypes, and the broader instances of stereotype confirming and stereotype resisting depictions in US media.

The Model Minority Myth

One of the major stigmas associated with the Indian diaspora in the United States is the myth of the model minority. This stereotype portrays members of this community as academically, professionally and socially successful, with a strong work ethic and success in perceived prestigious fields such as medicine, engineering or research. In the series, this myth is largely confirmed through the three main Indian characters, i.e. Devi, Nalini and Kamala, as well as through several other secondary characters such as Nirdesh – Devi's Indian friend – and Prashant – Kamala's temporary fiancée. Devi embodies the stereotype, as she is the valedictorian and one of the highest-achieving students in her high school, with aspirations to attend an Ivy League institution such as Princeton. From the outside, she is seen by her peers as an excellent student with whom they can get good grades. For instance, she was chosen by Paxton for their history group project because "she's good at this stuff, so it's like a guaranteed A. That's why I ask her". Her mother, Nalini, is a dermatologist and a highly socially valued

profession, and throughout the show, it is understood that she was a brilliant student, as shown in the flashbacks of her talking about receiving "professional awards" ("…Begged For Forgiveness" 16:24) or that "she was the first person ever to win the Bevins Surgical Award as a resident" ("…Betrayed a Friend" 16:07). Finally, Kamala is a microbiology researcher at CalTech, another prestigious university. Therefore, the three main characters further reinforce the image of an Indian community focused on prestigious scientific and academic careers. In that regard, the series adopts a stereotype confirming approach to the myth by aligning with the basics of the minority model, i.e. an academically successful, hardworking, and high-achieving minority.

However, the series complexifies and takes a more nuanced look at the consequences of this myth. It also examines the negative consequences that the myth produces at an individual and societal level. Indeed, the myth of the model minority has negative impacts on the community that is subjected to it, especially when the community internalises it. The negative impacts can be seen in many scenes of the show. For instance, Nalini emphasises to Devi that academic success is more important than anything else, putting pressure on her to succeed academically. During Ganesh Puja, she says to Devi before she prays, "pray you get into Princeton. Don't waste your prayers on stupid things like world peace" ("…Felt Super Indian" 9:55). Also, when Devi is praying and making her wishes, the narrator flashbacks on her usual Ganesh Puja's wishes, and one of them was "hearing her mother say the thing she most longed for. 'I'm so proud of you'" (10:42). This echoes model minorities' struggle mentioned in the theoretical part, which imposes significant pressure on individuals to meet higher expectations, leading to psychological anguish, worry, and feelings of inadequacy when they fail to do so.

At the individual level, the consequences are that Indian Americans may experience pressure from their families, classmates, and themselves to achieve academic and professional excellence, often arising from comparisons with other successful Indian Americans and the conviction that they must maintain the model minority stereotype. In several episodes, Devi conveys that she feels under constant pressure to succeed, so as not to disappoint her mother or her late father's wishes of her going to Princeton, which "was actually a dream he [Mohan] and I [Devi] came up with together. ("…Gone to Prom" 27:54). Due to that constant pressure of success, she makes snap decisions, such as applying only to Ivy League schools despite her high school counsellor's advice against it ("…Gone to Prom"), cheating in a debate competition

when she felt she was losing against a private and elitist high school ("…Cheated"), or lying to everyone about the results of her college admissions letters, claiming acceptance to all Ivy League schools when none had accepted her. Devi decides to lie about the response letters because she is afraid of her mother's reaction and to admit, "that her mother's only child was a capital-F failure" ("…Gone to Prom" 0:40) that she lost focus on her academic life for her social life. By the end of the episode, the lie is exposed, and Devi is a huge disappointment to her mother "how could you be so stupid" (24:8). Moreover, when Devi gets deferred by Princeton a few episodes earlier, she starts to question her self-worth to her therapist:

> DEVI. Getting deferred is a bad thing. It means they're not sure about me. They're not sure I'm good enough.
>
> THERAPIST. But do you think you're good enough?
>
> DEVI. Honestly, I don't know anymore."
>
> ("…Had my Dream Stolen" 25:55)

This draws attention to the model minority myth's significant psychological effects, particularly on young adults, as they navigate the stress and anxiety associated with balancing academic demands. This incident serves as an example of how the idea of perfection can result in excessive behaviour driven by internalised pressure and a fear of failing.

Another consequence of the internalisation of the myth, but this time at the community level, is seen with the character of Manish – Devi's English teacher – who does not fit into the model minority myth. As a reminder, Indian Americans who do not fit into the myth can face discrimination or exclusion from their own community. Therefore, they may feel isolated or judged by the community. As for Manish, he is a high school English teacher, a profession that is far less recognised and valued by the community. This places him outside the model, thereby ostracising him from the rest of the community. A key scene that illustrates Manish's inadequacy in fitting into the stereotype occurs when Nirmala – Devi's paternal grandmother – organises a mixer for Kamala, giving her the opportunity to find a husband following her failed arranged marriage, which will be discussed later in this paper. Nirmala invites only successful potential suitors, and upon seeing Manish, whom she did not know beforehand, she asks:

> NIRMALA. Are you the architect, the anaesthesiologist, or the astronaut?
>
> MANISH. None of the above. I teach English.

NIRMALA. At a university? Stanford perhaps?

MANISH. No, at Devi's high school.

NIRMALA. That rat hole? Whose grandson are you?

MANISH. I don't really know my grandparents. They are back in India, and I've never visited.

KAMALA. Pati, this is Manish Devi's favourite teacher.

NIRMALA. Where did you grow up? What do your parents do?

MANISH. Well, I grew up in Central Arkansas until my parents got divorced. Ruh-roh, and then my mom moved to Myrtle Beach to run a nightclub. And then my dad remarried a white woman in Baton Rouge, and now they run an Etsy store selling *Grateful Dead* sweatshirts.

NIRMALA. *In Tamil*. Kamala, get the hose!

KAMALA. *In Tamil*. Pati, stop it. He'll understand you.

MANISH. Yeah, feel free to say whatever you want. I don't speak any Indian languages.

("…Made Someone Jealous" 18:30)

This dialogue underscores Manish's divergence from the stereotypical model minority image. Nirmala's visible discomfort is heightened when she experiences a sudden drop in blood pressure and nearly faints, which abruptly ends the party. The exaggerated reaction serves as a hyperbolic yet telling commentary on Manish's perceived divergence from the stereotype, since, as an English teacher, Manish does not embody the professional success associated with the internalised model minority ideal. His profession is considered less prestigious by the community, and his inability to speak any Indian language compounds his inadequacy in Nirmala's eyes. After everyone left, Nirmala confirmed her disapproval of Manish to Kamala:

KAMALA. Devi's teacher asked me on a date.

NIRMALA. No, not him.

KAMALA. What's wrong with Manish? He's employed. He's handsome. He's Indian.

NIRMALA. He looks Indian, but he has the soul of Seth Rogen and none of the charm. […] and yet he made no effort to touch my feet. The astronaut touched them three times, and he has touched space.

KAMALA. Manish is American. I don't think we should dismiss him just because he wasn't raised to be so traditional.

NIRMALA. Oh, great. I'm glad his family was happy to throw away a culture passed down for a thousand generations.

(22:05)

In this scene, Nirmala embodies the Indian community, in which the myth is internalised to the point that professional success is a part of the Indian identity. This internalised myth is reinforced by Aravind – Devi's uncle – when he came to be the male chaperon to Kamala's meeting with her arranged fiancée in season two. During the dinner Aravind emphasises with pride the success of the family, "We have a lot of doctors in the family. Cousin Manju started her cardiology residency at 18. Devi, you have some catching up to do." ("…Had To Be On My Best Behavior" 11:26). This situation highlights the pressure and judgements faced by those who do not fit into the framework imposed by this myth.

In other words, the series addresses this stereotype both by reinforcing it through characters such as Devi, Nalini and Kamala, but also by criticising its limitations and showing its negative repercussions through the treatment meted out to Manish.

Orientalist Myths: Intersection of Race and Gender

Another stereotype Indian Americans face in America is the perpetuation of Orientalist myths and images. As a reminder, Edward Said defines Orientalism as the construction by the West of a simplified and fixed image of the East, reduced to notions of exoticism, unchanging tradition or cultural backwardness, in order to establish political and cultural domination. In the show, these Orientalist tropes are evoked in different ways.

Orientalism is observed in the show through the interactions of non-Indian characters with Indian culture. This is illustrated in a scene during Ganesh Puja, where Devi stops at a café dressed in her sari on her way to the celebration ("…Felt Super Indian"). As she queues to place her order, a young girl behind her asks, "are you Princess Jasmine?" while Devi politely responds, "No, but thank you. She is very beautiful," the girl follows up with, "Ariel's prettier. Where's Aladdin?" (1:15). Even though she is just a child, her question reduces Devi's cultural symbol – the sari – to a simplistic, fantastic stereotype rooted in Western media representations of the exotic East, such as Disney's portrayal of Middle Eastern and South Asian cultures

through the character of Princess Jasmine. The interaction escalates when the girl's mother intervenes with well-meaning but equally problematic enthusiasm. She asks Devi if her daughter can take a photo with her, describing it as "so cultural" (1:42). Devi politely declines, saying, "No thanks," but the mother insists, supported by others in the queue who admonish Devi with comments like, "she's just a little girl" (1:49). Devi reluctantly agrees to the photo, visibly uncomfortable. The mother's request reflects a form of Orientalism where cultural difference is commodified for personal gratification, with no regard to Devi's feelings. The insistence on taking a photo turns Devi into an object of fascination, reinforcing the notion that she exists – in traditional attire – solely for the entertainment or education of others.

The Orientalist framing continues when Devi reaches the counter. After placing her order, the barista asks if she would like anything to eat. Devi responds, "Yeah, Ira, I do, but I'm fasting today" (2:12). The barista, ignorant of Hindu traditions, immediately assumes: "Oh, is it Ramadan?". Devi's frustration is evident as she leaves the café without answering, the narrator retorts: "No, it's not, Ira. Today is Ganesh Puja" (2:18). The assumption that fasting must be tied to a more familiar, predominantly Islamic tradition reflects a limited and westernised understanding of South Asian cultural and religious practices, reducing Devi's identity to a monolithic Oriental identity. Indeed, according to Said, the American perception of the East is predominantly Arab and of Islamic traditions. While the interactions may appear harmless on the surface, the entire scene underscores how Orientalism operates in contemporary contexts, i.e. cultural practices and identities are either exoticised or misunderstood, filtered through Western-centric narratives that fail to differentiate and understand the complexity and individuality of non-Western traditions.

Another relevant theme in the show that implicates Orientalist stereotypes is the intersection of race and gender, i.e. intersectionality. The theoretical section discussed Orientalism and its specific implications for gender, as well as how it connects with race to create different levels of discrimination. Throughout seasons one and two, Kamala's story mainly focuses on her arranged marriage to Prashant, an eligible and successful Indian who studies at a prestigious university in Chicago – the 'perfect' suitor. In the beginning, the show addressed the topic of arranged marriage from a negative perspective, echoing a broader Orientalist thought that Oriental women are submissive and silent. Therefore, when Kamala accepted to enter the process of arranged marriage to follow and assure the family's duty, even

though she already has a boyfriend – Steve, the show conveys an Orientalist perspective on Indian traditions, depicting it as a process imposed on Indian women. For example, Kamala ends her relationship with her boyfriend in order to obey her parents:

> KAMALA. Steve, wait. We can no longer date
>
> STEVE. What?
>
> KAMALA. It's complicated but my parents want me to be with someone else. […] I have a duty to my family. I'm sorry. Goodbye Steve."
>
> ("…Had sex with Paxton Hall-Yoshida" 24:10)

Kamala accepts to perform and follows the Indian traditions despite her reluctance. She does it because she has a "duty to [her] family". Thus, the show initially tackles the subject of arranged marriage from an Orientalist stance.

Nonetheless, the show gives an increasingly complex – and partially Orientalist – perspective around Kamala's arranged marriage. As mentioned above, Kamala hesitated to enter the process of arranged marriage, for example, she tried to sabotage her Zoom meeting with Prashant's parents by acting 'westernised' ("…Had sex with Paxton Hall-Yoshida"). She tries to convince herself – and others – that it is the right thing to do but, in a conversation, she has with Steve she explicitly states that she lacks choice:

> STEVE. Wait Kamala. This is crazy, your parents can't force you to marry this guy.
> KAMALA. They not forcing me. I have a choice between my family and a life of shame that will disgrace me and my descendants for generations.
>
> STEVE. That's bullshit.
>
> KAMALA. Maybe it is, but I can't betray my family.
>
> ("…Gotten Drunk With The Popular Kids" 5:57)

As a result, Kamala initially decides to conform to Indian marriage traditions, feeling she has no real choice but to perform what is expected of her. Her decision is supported by Nalini, who herself met Mohan through an arranged marriage, which she portrays as a successful and positive experience. However, Kamala ultimately decides to defy these traditions after watching the American Netflix series *Riverdale* with Devi. In the series, the protagonist stands up to her mother to pursue a romantic relationship with her boyfriend. Kamala finds herself deeply resonating with this storyline, as it mirrors her own inner conflict. Inspired by the protagonist's

independence, Kamala immerses herself in the series for 16 hours and eventually decides to take control of her destiny. She rekindles her relationship with Steve, declaring, "I'm not here to be friends. I want to be with you…" ("…Gotten Drunk With The Popular Kids" 24:54). The problem with this story is the negative portrayal of arranged marriage and the reliance on a Western framework for Kamala's empowerment. Her courage to express her desires is directly influenced by the American television series 'Riverdale', which equates individual independence with rebellion against traditional values. This portrayal perpetuates an Orientalist discourse by casting a negative light on the concept of arranged marriage, making it seem oppressive or outdated. In reality, arranged marriage is a traditional practice in Indian culture, often based on mutual consent and family involvement, rather than coercion or force. However, Western narratives frequently conflate arranged marriages with forced marriages (*Medium*). While Nalini's experience serves as a positive example, the way the topic is handled throughout the series leans towards a reductive and orientalist portrayal.

Nonetheless, the show addresses Orientalists 'stereotypes the Western consciousness can have towards 'Oriental' women. In the theoretical section, I tackled the intersectionality of race and gender for Indian Americans and how it created different levels of discrimination towards Indian American women, discriminating them as Indian and as women. The stereotypes involved were Indian women seen as helpless, dependent, servile, docile, and submissive following the general discourse of Orientalist perception. In the show, this Western perception is embodied by Steve when trying to 'save' Kamala from her arranged marriage: "I'm rescuing my love from sexual slavery" ("…Had To Be On My Best Behavior" 8:30), and showing up to her house the day of her meeting with Prashant "You shouldn't be bought and sold by your family like a prized calf" ("…Had To Be On My Best Behavior" 10:40). In these excerpts, Steve embodies the classic trope of the 'Western saviour', where a man intervenes to free a woman from a perceived oppressive situation. He assumes that Kamala is a passive victim of this tradition and needs his help to escape. This scene reflects again a simplistic Western view of arranged marriages, often reduced to a lack of choice or oppression, without considering their diversity or cultural significance. However, Kamala's response to Steve deconstructs and addresses this stereotype:

KAMALA. Why are you here?

STEVE. Because you shouldn't be bought and sold by your family like a prized calf.

KAMALA. That's not what's happening here and that also feels a little racial

STEVE. I want a chance to make my offer, let me start by saying I don't have a ring…
KAMALA. No, no, no, get up. I don't want to marry you.

STEVE. ohh but you do want to marry that stranger downstairs?

KAMALA. No, I don't wanna marry anyone Steve you're so sweet and handsome and surprisingly good at mini golf and I appreciate you being my first boyfriend but..

STEVE.oh, no, did I just talk to breaking up with?

KAMALA. *Nods.*

 (10:40)

By asserting that she does not need his intervention, Kamala demonstrates her autonomy and her ability to navigate between her family's expectations and her own desires. This response underlines that Kamala is not a passive victim but an autonomous woman capable of making her own choices. Thus, Kamala's response and character exemplify a stereotype resisting representation of Indian women, as she takes control of her fate and later in the series flees from Prashant's marriage proposal because she feels unready to marry. This defiance of traditional expectations not only challenges the stereotype of Indian women as submissive or docile but also offers a portrayal that aligns with an intersectional framework, highlighting the agency of women navigating the overlapping pressures of cultural, gendered, and racial identities. Steve's awkwardness in this scene, where he projects his own tainted perceptions onto the situation, also seems to criticise the ignorance or arrogance of certain perspectives from outside Indian culture. Although well intentioned, Steve represents a Western tendency to interpret non-Western cultural practices as oppressive or problematic, without understanding their nuances.

Stereotype Resisting Representations: The Nerdy Unattractive Indian Man

The show presents another stereotypical resistance to Indian representation, i.e. the unattractive, nerdy and socially awkward Indian guy. The show predominantly portrays Indian women such as Kamala, Devi, Nalini, Nirmala and Aneesa. However, the few Indian men present in the show challenge the typical image of the Indian man in American media. Prashant, Kamala's fiancé during seasons one and two, is a clear example of stereotype resistance. Before meeting him, Kamala and Devi assume that Prashant will conform to the trope of the 'typical' Indian man – intelligent but unattractive and socially awkward. This assumption is evident

when Devi blurts out upon meeting him, "Ohh damn, you're hot" ("…Had to be on my best behavior" 6:50). Nalini scolds Devi for her comment, but Devi apologises, explaining, "it's just like we were expecting an uggo"(6:55). This moment reveals how deeply ingrained the stereotype is within their own family. Prashant's intelligence and professional success initially lead them to expect he will lack physical attractiveness or charm. However, Prashant defies these expectations, presenting himself as confident, charismatic, and physically attractive. By subverting these assumptions, Prashant challenges the narrow narrative of the nerdy Indian man, instead offering a stereotype resisting the portrayal of Indian men.

Another example of a stereotype resisting the representation of Indian men is the introduction of Nirdesh or 'Des' in season three. Des is the son of Nalini's friend, Rhyah, that Devi reluctantly agrees to bring to a party as a condition of her mother's permission to attend it. Without meeting Des, Devi immediately assumes – like Prashant – that he will fit the stereotype of the nerdy, socially awkward Indian boy: "my mom wouldn't let me come unless I brought one of her friends 'loser kids. […] this kid is like a medical-grade dork. Maybe we could tell everyone he's my cousin" ("…Made Someone Jealous" 14:45). Devi's prejudgement of Des highlights her own internalisation of the stereotype, assuming that, as an Indian boy, he must lack social skills, attractiveness, or charisma. This assumption continues until Des arrives at the party, challenging Devi's expectations. Upon realising that Des is not what she imagined, Devi tries to excuse her earlier assumptions, but Des calls her out directly:

> NIRDESH. You thought I was gonna be a huge loser based on what?
>
> DEVI. Well because certain cultural context clues and…
>
> NIRDESH. Because I'm Indian? Okay I think I'm good.
>
> DEVI. Wait! Des, no. I'm so sorry. I did not mean to offend you. But, hey, let's be honest. There's a lot of nerdy Indian guys. And I don't know if you know this, but your name does have the word nerd, in it, so…
>
> NIRDESH. Ohh, wow. You're the first person who's ever said that to me. Definitely no one in elementary school did. Look, it's.. it's fine. I've met a million of you before. You're one of those Indian girls who only likes white guys, and thinks all Indian dudes are just computer geeks or cheesy club rats who wear too much Cologne.
>
> DEVI. No, that's not what I'm like."
>
> THE NARRATOR. That's exactly what's she's like. ("…Made Someone Jealous" 16:58)

This exchange highlights how Devi herself perpetuates the harmful stereotypes she has internalised. Nirdesh's sarcasm reveals his own frustration with being reduced to a set of cultural expectations, particularly by someone within the Indian diaspora. Des's response is significant because it flips the narrative, forcing Devi to confront her biases rather than allowing her to excuse them. By standing up for himself and articulating the frustrations of being stereotyped, Des not only challenges Devi's preconceptions but also critiques the broader societal tendency to box Indian men into narrow and limiting tropes. Moreover, the narrator's interjection – "That's exactly what she's like" – after Devi's last sentence underscores that Devi's behaviour is not just an isolated moment but part of a broader pattern.

Both examples of stereotype resistant representations of Indian men not only counter the dominant narrative about Indian men but also address it through Devi and Des's interactions. In the first example, from season two, the stereotype is implicitly challenged. Prashant serves as a counter-narrative both physically and socially, yet neither he nor the rest of the family directly responds to Devi's remark. In contrast, the example involving Des in season three explicitly addresses the stereotype. Des directly points out the typical prejudices Indian men face in US media, confronting Devi's assumptions. This progression – from implicit resistance with Prashant to explicit critique through Des – demonstrates how the treatment of this stereotype evolves throughout the series, gradually shifting from subtle defiance to open confrontation.

Conclusion

Despite the omission of an important part of the History of the Indian diaspora, i.e. the old Indian diaspora, or the diaspora resulting from colonial policies, the Netflix series Never Have I Ever skilfully explores the complexities of identity, culture, and belonging for Indian Americans by navigating the tensions between assimilation and cultural retention, as well as offering a rich portrayal of the Indian American experience within the broader context of multicultural America. However, this series fails to acknowledge the significant history of the old Indian diaspora, which was shaped by colonial policies, such as indentured Indians emigrating from former British colonies to the United States.

As a reminder, this paper posited that *Never Have I Ever* offered a more diverse and nuanced depiction of the Indian diaspora in the United States by highlighting characters who have long been marginalised in mainstream American media. By exploring themes such as the challenges of integration, intergenerational conflict, and the development of ethnic identity within the Indian American community, the paper assumed that the show challenged traditional stereotypes, particularly the model minority myth and Orientalist biases.

As shown in the analysis, Devi's character encapsulates the internal struggle between the pressure to conform to the dominant cultural ideal, as symbolised by the melting pot metaphor, and the desire to embrace her unique identity. Her wish to blend in with American norms – whether through parties, relationships, or physical traits – highlights the societal pressure to conform and be seen as normal. However, the show also presents a counterpoint to this ideal through the diverse and multifaceted characters, reflecting the Salad Bowl metaphor of cultural coexistence. Through these characters' personal stories and experiences, the series showcases the complexities of maintaining one's cultural heritage while navigating the challenges of an often prejudiced and discriminatory society. By championing inclusivity and critically examining the realities of growing up in a multicultural society, Never Have I Ever makes a valuable contribution to the portrayal of the Indian diaspora in contemporary U.S. media. The series highlights both the positive aspects of cultural diversity and the hardships minority communities face, reaffirming the need for a more nuanced, authentic representation of multicultural America.

Devi's hyphenated identity also reflects the broader challenges faced by first-generation born Indian Americans. Her struggle to reconcile her Indian heritage with her desire to assimilate into American culture is a relevant representation of the emotional and social tension inherent in the immigrant experience. Through her interactions with her family, peers, and mentors, *Never Have I Ever* highlights the conflict between maintaining cultural traditions and seeking acceptance within a dominant culture. Devi's journey is marked by moments of discomfort and internalised shame regarding her Indian identity, which contrasts with characters like Harish, who ultimately embrace their heritage with pride. Furthermore, the arrival of Aneesa introduces a new dynamic, forcing Devi to confront her insecurities and question her own relationship with her cultural identity. Aneesa's ease in navigating both worlds reveal Devi's ongoing struggles and amplifies her feelings of inadequacy.

Moreover, the contrasting acculturation styles of Devi's parents, Nalini and Mohan, significantly shape Devi's ethnic identity and her navigation of the complex dynamics between her Indian heritage and American culture. Nalini's separatist approach creates a rigid environment, fostering conflict with Devi, who leans towards an assimilationist stance. Mohan's more integrated perspective, however, provides a bridge between the two cultures, offering Devi the support she needs to navigate her dual identity. Throughout the series, Devi's journey reflects the challenges of reconciling these differing cultural expectations, ultimately evolving from a place of discomfort to a more confident embrace of both her Indian and American identities. Her transformation demonstrates the dynamic nature of identity formation within a diasporic context.

As for the exploration of the stereotypes surrounding the Indian diaspora in the United States, the show simultaneously reinforces and critiques these stereotypes by presenting characters who embody them, such as Devi, Nalini, and Kamala – embodying the model minority myth – while also highlighting the negative impacts of these expectations on individual identity and mental health with Devi's pressure of success or Manish's ostracisation from the Indian community. Thus, addressing the stereotype without refuting and negating it. Moreover, the portrayal of Orientalist myths and stereotypes in the show reveals the complexities of cultural misrepresentation and the intersection of race and gender. Devi and Kamala's experiences help to highlight how Western perspectives often reduce Indian cultural

practices to exoticised or oppressive stereotypes, particularly in relation to arranged marriages and traditional gender roles. However, the characters' responses – whether through uncomfortable interactions, defiance, or assertions of autonomy – challenge these simplistic views, offering a more nuanced understanding of these stigmas. In doing so, *Never Have I Ever* critiques both the Orientalist lens and the limitations of Western frameworks for interpreting non-Western cultures, while simultaneously empowering Indian American women to assert their own voices and choices.

Finally, the characters of Prashant and Nirdesh function as stereotypes resisting representations of Indian men, who typically are portrayed as nerdy, socially awkward, or unattractive. Thus, their characters – by being attractive, intelligent and socially confident, they offer alternative narratives that challenge societal assumptions. By addressing these themes with both nuance and humour, the series invites viewers to reflect on the limitations of stereotypes and the diversity of representation within the Indian American community.

Despite neglecting an important part of the History of the Indian diaspora, i.e. the old Indian diaspora, or the diaspora resulting from colonial policies, through her characters, Kaling does not propose a total rejection of stereotypes about Indians in the United States and U.S. media, but rather a more complex and realistic perspective of the Indian diaspora, giving more depth to these characters. However, it is crucial that these representations continue to be enriched and diversified further. Since Kaling is one of the most prominent figures in the representation of Indian Americans, repeatedly offering similar portrayals of the community poses a risk of perpetuating a new set of stereotypes.

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<u>Appendix</u>

Season 1

1. Pilot

2. ... had sex with Paxton Hall-Yoshida

3. ... gotten drunk with the popular kids

4. ... felt super Indian

5. ... started a nuclear war

6. ... been the loneliest boy in the world

7. ... been a big, fat liar

8. ... pissed off everyone I know

9. ... had to be on my best behavior

10. ... said I'm sorry

Season 2

1. ... been a playa

2. ... thrown a rager

3. ... opened a textbook

4. ... had an Indian frenemy

5. ... ruined someone's life

6. ... betrayed a friend

7. ... begged for forgiveness

8. ... been Daisy Buchanan

9. ... stalked my own mother

10. ... been a perfect girl

Season 3

1. ...been slut-shamed

2. ...had my own troll

3. …had a valentine

4. ...made someone jealous

5. ...been ghosted

6. ...had a breakdown

7. ...cheated

8. ...hooked up with my boyfriend

9. …had an Indian boyfriend

10. ...lived the dream

Season 4

1. ...lost my virginity

2. ...gotten sweet revenge

3. ...liked a bad boy

4. ...wrecked my future

5. ...been to New Jersey

6. ...had my dream stolen

7. ...had an identity crisis

8. ...set my mom up

9. ...gone to prom

10. ...said goodbye