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New Media Rockstars: The Coloured Women of YouTube

“[I]t is time for elaborating a version of multiculturalism that dispenses with reified notions of culture, engages more ruthlessly with cultural stereotypes, and refuses to subordinate the rights and interests of women to the supposed traditions of their culture”

- Anne Phillips, *Multiculturalism Without Culture*

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Abstract

This paper examines the role played by three prominent coloured women, namely, Anna Akana, Liza Koshy and Lilly Singh, in one of the most influential social media spaces, YouTube, in dealing with the sensitive issue of multiculturalism. These first generation mixed race women being YouTube comedians use their global reach and own techniques of utilizing humour to deftly talk about the serious topics of racism, ethnic stereotyping and identity crisis that the immigrants have to face owing to their differences in colour, culture and other systems of belief. They also discuss the liminal space they occupy due to the discrimination faced from both the white populace as well as their own people owing to their mixed race identity. This paper aims to analyse how efficient their way of handling such subtle and complex problems is in educating the global mass about them and to highlight the necessity of fighting undue cultural assimilation and exotification under the Eurocentric gaze.

Key Words: Multiculturalism, Mixed Race, Social Media, Humour, Ethnic Stereotyping, Assimilation, Eurocentric Gaze

The present generation of entertainers wields the powerful medium of social media for communicating with an extremely wide range of audience without any barriers as such. It can perhaps be said that YouTube is one such platform that facilitates this fluid interaction in the most impactful way possible. With a viewership of millions of people from all across the globe these YouTubers exercise a great deal of power. But as Uncle Ben from *Spider-man* fame had said, “With great power comes great responsibility.” In the process of making their presence felt, they experiment with a lot of styles, themes, issues and concepts. As such

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many sensitive issues get dealt with by these new age performers through their art styles. This article shall specifically make an attempt at analyzing how the problematic of multiculturalism is handled by the first generation mixed-race or coloured young women having American and Canadian citizenships, who utilize their channels on YouTube to educate through comedy. In this article, the endeavors of three women namely, Anna Akana, Liza Koshy and Lilly Singh (aka IISuperwomanII), will be systematically studied to show how effective their use of humour is while spreading awareness among common people regarding the significance and complexities of multiculturalism.

In the recent decade, there has been a decided rise in the autonomy (albeit monitored by social media guidelines) handed out to the youths to explore and express their opinions on anything and everything through the various social media spaces such as, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and most definitely YouTube. This allows them to venture out on previously uncharted territories which could earlier be accessed only by intellectuals, academicians, politicians, businessmen, and the entertainment industry run by rich stakeholders; basically people in power. It was possible because this cyber space was virtual and as such, a little less threatening as interactions were now being made through the buffer of screens and little direct contact was needed. People were now being able to adopt identities and experiment with different strategies of communication with not just the population in their locality or nation but the whole global populace. Whoever had an access to internet had the power in turn to impart, receive and process all kinds of information. Although there has been a rise in cyber crimes due to the cloak of invisibility found in this virtual space, it cannot be denied that artists, entertainers, performers, social media influencers, etc., have found a near perfect arena to reach out to their audiences. The three women that this article seeks to highlight have been, for years, touching up on many kinds of sensitive issues such as death, loss, relationships, racism, sexism, feminism, depression, human behavior, etc. In their hilarious renditions they try to reach out to millions of people and through the use of comedy educate them about these serious topics without sounding boring or offensive. It is not as if the response has always been unfailingly positive but they have facilitated the initiation of such conversations which people in general are unwilling or too afraid and anxious to talk about.

One such debatable issue is multiculturalism. In simple words multiculturalism is the view that in a society all cultures, races and ethnicities should be respected and allowed to coexist without being forced to lose their respective cultural identities in the process. This ideology lets the immigrants (Asians, Mexicans, etc.) and minority groups (African Americans, American Indians, Hispanics, etc) of America, Canada, Europe or Australia to coexist with the majority White population without being assimilated into the new culture by way of sacrificing their own. This ensures a form of cultural diversity that gives space for racial and ethnic equality and right to stay rooted to their particular cultural identities. But it has been receiving much criticism from the majority White community of America on the grounds of it being anti-feministic¹ and anti-American² according to their perception. Owing to the changing

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times it may not be too wrong to assume that the general public has become more open minded about differences in various cultures and as such is more accepting and respectful of them. But this unfortunately does in no way mean that the problems of racism, misrepresentation, stereotyping, or victimization formerly plaguing the minority groups have magically vanished. One such interesting issue is the liminal space allotted to the mixed-race immigrants, especially the first generation youths born out of such parents. They are citizens of the nation they are born in and as such are in tune with the cultural practices there. Yet they face a subtle form of segregation owing to their external appearances, surnames, food habits, etc. Some of these behaviors meted out to them often cannot be categorized as racism but can also not be dismissed as being entirely harmless. The stereotypical categories they are put into by their White American peers while growing up have shown to have detrimental effects on their overall psychological and emotional growth³.

The Asian Girl

American actress, filmmaker, comedian and author Anna Kay Akana (born August 18, 1989) has over two million subscribers in her YouTube channel which boasts of two hundred million views. Having a mixed race background, she has faced racial discrimination while being cast in movies, seeing roles formerly assigned to her go to White American women which suits the Hollywood standards better. In a video titled, ‘Am I White Washed?’ she points out how the non-Asian White community pushes her into a space where she is termed “white washed” for having just one Asian parent which according to them makes her “not Asian enough.” She goes on to say that this behavior reflects upon their expectations of Asians (and other non-American minority groups) to meet a certain “ethnic stereotype”, a failure to which disqualifies them from being termed a “true” Asian. This highlights how myopic their vision is, contrary to what they often portray themselves to be. Conversely these “white-washed Asians” must not be fully assimilated in to the White community owing to their dissimilarities in colour, facial features, culture, etc. Hollywood is famously known to tamper with storylines of non-American origins by casting Caucasian actors to play the roles of Asian, African, Indian and other race characters. Akana terms this to be the example of actual “white washing” instead of what the running definition of it is believed to be. She further criticizes this need to project their own ideas of ethnicity on such groups forcing them to exist in a grey space if they did not perform accordingly, often throwing “slurs at them when they don’t fulfill the idea of who you think they should be.” (02:05).

In another video titled, “Why Guys Like Asian Girls”, through her comedic skills, she portrays how the complete other spectrum of fetishizing Asian girls as geishas, maids, sexualized schoolgirls, etc. is also increasingly problematic. This obsession termed “yellow fever” complicates the way Asian females are viewed through the lens of Eurocentrism making them exotic objects of worship and exploitation alike, in turn, leading to their dehumanization. Akana questions this harmful tendency to “romanticize an entire race as being submissive, or weak, or docile, or delicate...or whatever...is the allure of Asian women.” (01:08). On the

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contrary Asian men must face the exact opposite problem for they are similarly assumed to be weak and as such, unfit for the hegemonic masculine standards of American men, thus making them easy target for emasculation.

Little Brown Girl

Elizabeth Shaila Koshy, better known as Liza Koshy, is a twenty three year old YouTuber with sixteen million subscribers and two billion views. With her extremely slapstick style, self-deprecating comedy full of puns, she reaches out to almost all age groups of people and effectively utilizes this virtual platform to deal with a myriad of topics. In one such video titled, “Mixed Kids Problems Growing Up Multicultural”, she talks about being “brown”. People assume her cultural background to be Mexican, Polynesian, Colombian, Brazilian, etc., and act shocked when she tells them her true mixed identity. Using food analogy she comically breaks it down for the viewers saying, “. . .you have heard the story of my dark chocolate dad and my white chocolate mom swirling together to make me - a rich, creamy, smooth milk chocolate.” (00:46). She then enumerates the various jargonistic terms attached to her cultural identity such as, “racially ambiguous, ethnically mysterious, curiously racialized.” Koshy then relates her experiences as a child with a different skin colour than that of her White mother’s. When they would go out together, they would often be asked to clarify if she was adopted or whether a white woman was actually stealing a Mexican child away. Her white grandfather would refer to her as a “coffee coloured grandchild” and her parents would jokingly call her their “little Mexican daughter” causing her to experience a sort of identity crisis from a very young age. To complicate things further, her external appearance would not conform to any specific cultural stereotype. Her hair would often turn into a “baby afro” but on other times would be quite manageable; much like Wole Soyinka in the poem “Telephone Conversation” she categorizes the colour gradation of the different parts of her body. Koshy points out how different it was for her as a mixed race child to relate and form groups back in school, probably making a sly hint at the automatic segregation done by the kids based on skin colour, culture, race, etc. As such she would befriend everyone be it the white kids, brown kids like herself (her father is Indian), Hispanic kids, African American kids, or Asian kids. But it was confusing for her especially when the ethnicity surveys would be conducted; she would not know which option to select as she was both Caucasian and Asian and there was no box for mixed race as an option.

In the end she urges everyone to embrace their own cultures and be proud of it as she is being a biracial person herself. Koshy, albeit in a light hearted tone, manages to skillfully touch up on this sensitive issue without as much as offending any particular cultural group, minority or otherwise, and succeeds in hosting this topic up for further conversations and discussions.

Canadian Superwoman

Lilly Singh, better known by her YouTube name “IISuperwomanII”, is a first generation Sikh from India born and brought up in Canada. With fourteen million subscribers to her

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channel from all over the world, she acts, collaborates, directs, and even writes. In an interview to a channel called Popsugar, she talks about how although her parents would never pressurize her to match up to the standards of a fair skinned Indian beauty, the rest of the Indian community in Canada would try to drill in this idea of a lighter skin tone into their children’s minds. This institutionalization was so deep that even a lot of her grown up Indian friends would refrain from going out in the beach without proper cover lest they get a tan. Ironically, her white friends would invest time and money on getting their bodies tanned under the sun or artificially. This highlights the idea of multiculturalism being not as simplistic as it is often perceived to be. In *Rethinking Multiculturalism*, Bhikhu Parekh had said, “Every cultural community exists in the midst of others and is inescapably influenced by them.” (Parekh 163). In the light of this comment, one may realize how complex these aspects of diverse cultures are; brown skinned people’s obsession with white skin and a similar and converse craze amongst the white skinned populace to achieve a perfect tan. Whether it is a conscious and simple attempt at emulating a trait of the opposite race that they like or a more psychologically ingrained need to assimilate an exotified standard of beauty into their own community, one cannot plainly say.

In her video titled, “Real Things White People Have Said to Me”, she points out the subtle and troubling ways in which the Eurocentric gaze tries to possess the Indian/immigrant identity and categorizes it into separately held stereotypical views. Right from changing Indian names into English ones for ease of pronunciation to assuming that Singh’s parents must have forced her to an early marriage for that being the strict Indian tradition everywhere, she systematically enumerates all the half-informed and inappropriate questions often thrown at her. On an overt level these unsolicited assumptions and questions seem harmless, germinating from innocent curiosity to learn about a different culture. In reality these are troublingly regressive forms of otherizing the immigrants as it makes the need to educate oneself about a culture unnecessary, thus falling back on age old stereotypes repeatedly. If not exclusively racist, these mannerisms are disrespectful. Singh then presents a reverse scenario for every such question hurled her way to bring things into perspective. She purposely highlights how impertinent the questions and assumptions sound when an immigrant similarly asks them to a white person based on American culture stereotypes. In another video titled, “A Geography Class for Racist People”, she foregrounds an issue of culture and nationality faced by the immigrants. Although she is a Canadian, she is also ethnically Indian. This double identity of immigrants positions them in a problematic grey area where they are not fully accepted as true citizens of the nation they are in and also cannot dismiss their racial identity for obvious reasons. This liminal space occupied by them often results in racial segregation in a two pronged manner – one, they are not welcomed into the dominant culture; and two, they are also not fully assimilated into their own culture because, being born in a different nation makes them foreign to their own systems and customs. Thus, this automatically leads to a kind of identity crisis that uproots them entirely.

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Conclusion

Multiculturalism is a much needed medicine to cure the disease of intra and inter-racial conflicts in all their subtleties. Although it has often been criticized as being anti-feministic in nature, it must not be forgotten that even feminism has been brutally disapproved of (and wrongly so) as being anti-men. This only goes to show that it is the proper understanding and exercise of the term that is needed instead of its eradication. The role of vocal and strong women in the new media thus assumes great importance as they utilize their creativity to highlight these burning issues in a manner most palatable to the modern viewership. In times like these where racially (and culturally) based communalism is raging rampant both in India as in the rest of the world, it is not enough to be content with successfully addressing the problem in closed circles. It is the need of the hour to place this crisis in front of the global population and open their eyes to the necessity of open conversations leading to a positive change in the mindset. That is why the work done by these entertainers of the YouTube community needs to be encouraged as well as thoroughly analyzed as an upcoming prominent genre. Anna Akana, Liza Koshy and Lilly Singh are names which have stood up in their own ways to deal with the issue of multiculturalism and in turn have opened up a new space for discussions related to this matter. Other similar speakers, performers and entertainers from marginalized communities from all across the globe have come up with their own methods of handling similar topics. Being a vast platform comparatively less scrutinized and free from the stronghold of political groups so far, YouTube has become a tool of the formerly voiceless and marginalized to exercise their freedom of expression; and these women have become the voices of them all.

Notes

1. As thoroughly highlighted and criticised by both Chandran Kukathas (in “Distinguished Lecture in Public Affairs: Is Feminism Bad for Multiculturalism?”) and Anne Phillips (in *Multiculturalism Without Culture*) while dealing with Susan Okin’s ideologies as articulated in her body of work mainly *Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?*, as duly cited by them.
2. See e. g., Gonzalez, Mike. “Multiculturalism and the Fight for America’s National Identity.” *The Heritage Foundation*, no. 1277, 23 Nov. 2016. www.report.heritage.org/hl1277.
Also see, Williams, Ryan P. “Defend America – Defeat Multiculturalism.” *The American Mind*, April 23, 2019. www.americanmind.org/essays/defend-america-defeat-multiculturalism/. Accessed 1 May 2019.
3. See e. g., Benner, Aprile D., et al. “Racial/Ethnic Discrimination and Well-Being During Adolescence: A Meta-Analytic Review.” *American Psychologist*, vol. 73, no. 7, 2018, pp. 855 – 883. American Psychological Association, [x.doi.org/10.1037/amp0000204](https://doi.org/10.1037/amp0000204). Accessed 1 May 2019.

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