1

South Asians and the Hollywood Party

Peter Sellers and Brownface Performances

Even though it seems as if South Asians are ever present in contemporary television and film, this was not the case in the twentieth century. Prior to 2000, the most recognizable South Asian characters on American network television was the animated character Apu on *The Simpsons* (1989–).\(^1\) In the film industry, independent filmmakers, British and Canadian producers, and Indian and other South Asian media outlets created and showed multiple media images of the South Asian diaspora throughout the latter half of the twentieth century; however, Hollywood made very few films that featured the South Asian immigrant experience or South Asian Americans. This chapter gives a short history of the portrayals of South Asians in American film in the twentieth century and focuses on how the origins of brown-voice and brownface performance are recreations of Orientalist roles that diminish the threat of Asian immigration through the portrayal of comic and harmless South Asian characters.

One of the most influential racial performances of a South Asian in the United States is Peter Sellers’s Indian character Hrundi V. Bakshi in the film *The Party* (1968), directed by Blake Edwards. Sellers’s humorous portrayal of an immigrant Indian relies on reinforcing the cultural differences between Indians and Americans in the 1960s. Actors and comedians, such as Hank Azaria, the voice of Apu, and Mike Myers, *Saturday Night Live* alumni and actor who plays an Indian guru, both credit Sellers’s performance as inspirations for their development of cross-racial and cross-ethnic characters. Azaria admits that his vocal accent for Apu is loosely based on Peter Sellers’s Bakshi.\(^2\) Myers, while he was growing up in England and Canada, was raised on British comedy and fondly recalls watching Peter Sellers on television with his father.\(^3\) Hence, an influential model for contemporary brownface and brown-voice performances is grounded in earlier work established in British comedy. As a prolific British radio performer and screen comedian, Sellers had previously used vocal accents and cultural mannerisms to create Indian characters in British films such as *The Millionairess* (1960), directed by Anthony Asquith. Sellers’s role in *The Party* is a departure from previous characters because he is playing an immigrant Indian actor working in the American film industry. He is not a colonial native or a British citizen; instead, his character is representative of the post-1965 wave of immigrants from Asia and South Asia to the United States. *The Party* and the role of Hrundi Bakshi mark the transition from prior British colonial-native narratives to American model-minority narratives and a transition from British understandings of South Asians to American interpretations of South Asians.

Although scholars of race and ethnicity in
American film have devoted more studies to Asian Americans in film, most of them have neglected South Asians as a racialized group outside of British or Indian film history. Key texts about the portrayals of Asians and Asian Americans in film and television history include works by Peter Feng, Darrell Hamamoto, Robert G. Lee, Gina Marchetti, and Kent Ono, to name a few, but rarely have any of them have discussed in detail the history of South Asians in American film or television. This chapter discusses the film The Party to show the historical change of portrayals of South Asians in American films from colonialist narratives to model-minority American immigrants and citizens. Later representations of brownface performance in animated shows magnify the role of the vocal Indian accent. The next chapter theorizes brown voice and the relationship to language and accent as a racializing aspect of South Asian identity. This chapter focuses on the history of brownface performance in American narratives that includes brown voice as one component of Indian racial impersonations. I argue that the characteristics of brown-voice and brownface performance are rooted in early film narratives that emphasize the history of British imperialism and colonialism in India that are later carried over and rewritten to encompass Indian immigrants in the United States.

From British Colonial to American Immigrant: Role-Playing in The Party

Blake Edward’s The Party (1968) features Peter Sellers in dark-brown makeup (brownface), playing the bumbling Indian actor Hrundi Bakshi. Bakshi’s character is expressed through physical humor that emphasizes the contrast (seen as comedic ineptness) between him and Hollywood... American culture. The film is a one-joke comedy sketch developed around the idea of what happens when a small-time Indian actor in the United States is inadvertently invited to an exclusive Hollywood studio head’s party. The action of the film centers on Bakshi’s fish-out-of-water status at the party that includes him trying to retrieve a missing shoe, finding a place to sit at the formal dining table, attempting to make small talk, falling in and out of the water pools, and frolicking around the premises with a baby elephant. The reaction to the film was mixed, with some critics lauding the pairing of Edwards with Sellers and others deriding the film as too long and too narrowly focused on one joke.

Sellers’s characterization of Bakshi depicts him as an object to be commented on and responded to for comic effect rather than an individual with his own story. Bakshi, in effect, becomes an accent and a “cultural thing.” The verbal misidentifications that confuse Bakshi’s national identity as an Indian with Native Americans (“Hey, Chief”) are secondary to his physical awkwardness at the party. His performance in The Party is based on physical and visual comedy but also includes an Indian vocal accent. Comedy, rather than drama, tends to be a more suitable genre to use exaggeration as a central plot device because the notion of equality is diminished when the exaggeration emphasizes a complete dissimilarity to what is perceived as normal and renders the situation humorous. Comedy tends to objectify difference.

While Sellers may don a brown face and perform an Indian accent that depicts the character as a comic simpleton, the film, in fact,
shows the transformation of South Asians from supporting characters in colonial narratives to South Asian immigrants and foreigners in U.S. culture. Bakshi’s character is introduced through his film role as a native in the British colonial army, his morning ritual of meditating and playing the sitar, and his interactions at the Hollywood party. Critic Mandel Herbstman points out that the main plot and action of the story revolve around the contrast between “the artless, uncomplicated actor from Asia” and “the nervous ambitious actors of Hollywood.” However, this description by the critic misses the fact that the portrayal of an Indian actor is far from uncomplicated.

We see this complexity from the beginning of the film. The first scene opens with an empty, barren, and rocky landscape. There are no credits, and the only sound is the approaching music of Scottish bagpipes and whistling British troops. The director does not need to set up a time or place because the first person to appear in the film is a brown-skinned man in a white turban, British military jacket, and loose Indian trousers (Sellers). The sound, the landscape, and the exotic native evoke the familiar tropes of the colonial narrative. The scene shows the villains are the native men in turbans, hiding in the hills with guns and waiting to ambush the unsuspecting British military company. Sellers is the loyal Indian bugler who warns the troops and as a result is shot by the rebels even as he blows his horn to save the British. The move from colonial drama to comedy occurs when Sellers turns his character’s heroic death into an extended and exaggerated death act that goes on for several minutes with his last breaths punctuated by the toot of his horn until the director’s “cut” finally stops the scene. The film changes from a colonial adventure set in 1878 where Sellers has been cast as an expendable native to a narrative about the actor, Hrundi Bakshi.

Hrundi Bakshi (played by Peter Sellers) as a colonial native in *The Party* (MGM, 1968)

The reference to colonial dramas in the film highlights the previous historical representation of South Asians in Hollywood film. Unlike other Asian American groups, South Asian Americans (until recently) do not have a history inflected with war or colonialism in relation to the United States but instead are linked to the United States economically and politically by the ties of capitalism and a British-based democracy; India
is represented as an Asian country with seemingly Western (if not American) values. Thus, early Hollywood portrayals emphasized Indians in the context of British history. As film scholar Marchetti points out, Hollywood films were not catering to Asian Americans at the box office so their interest was to use “Asians, Asian Americans, and Pacific Islanders as signifiers of racial otherness to avoid the far more immediate racial tensions between blacks and whites or the ambivalent mixture of guilt and hatred towards Native Americans and Hispanics.” Although she does not discuss South Asian portrayals, the idea that South Asians in British Raj narratives offered a safe and escapist fantasy of racial otherness explains the limited subject matter for South Asians. Depictions of South Asians often emphasize the differences between Indian culture and Western culture and, hence, support Orientalist narratives of the East. Although Americans derived pleasure and paid at the box office for the stories of Gunga Din, Mowgli, and the Arabian Nights, these narratives intentionally drew strong lines between English identity and Indian identity that discouraged the crossing of cultural, national, and racial boundaries.

In early film history, most Hollywood images of South Asians were confined to British (and sometimes American) tales of adventure or spiritual discovery set in colonial India. In her study of the representation of China and India in Hollywood film from 1896–1955, Dorothy B. Jones argues that before Indian Independence, Hollywood focused on three thematic threads that characterized narratives of India and Indians: impoverished and wily villagers, mystical wise men, and either treacherous or noble natives rising up against the British. The repetition of these stereotypes emphasizes what Homi Bhabha has called a “productive ambivalence” in colonist discourse: the idea that racial otherness is both “an object of desire and derision.” Colonial narratives addressed the desire for the other as the crossing of racial boundaries through the interactions of the native and the colonizer. The act of cross-dressing or performing as the native other was the topic of popular narratives ranging from the exploits of Lawrence of Arabia to Rudyard Kipling’s Kim. In American studies, Eric Lott characterizes nineteenth-century blackface performance by whites as “theft” in playing the other but also as “love” that allows white men to participate in taboo relationships between blacks and whites. The act of desiring the other is intimately linked to racial impersonation, but Bhabha’s term of “derision” evokes the comedic turn that these roles evolve into in American culture. In extending Bhabha’s argument to Indian accents, I posit that the origins of brown-voice and brownface performances stem from the interplay between the idea of playing the desirable role of the other and a role that needs constant repeating through ridicule and contempt to ward off the temptation of the other.

The first theme in colonial narratives emphasized India as a mystical place with religious cults. Many of the distinctions among different religions in India, including Hinduism, Islam, Sikhism, and Christianity, are lost or lumped into the idea of power-hungry, blood-sacrificing religious cults who threaten the rule and order of the British. The first motion picture that simultaneously visualizes and describes Indians is Thomas Edison’s film entitled Hindoo Fakir (1902). Jones chronicles a series of films
that feature Indian mysticism as a recurring theme, such as the *Soul of Buddha* (Fox, 1918), *The Green Goddess* (Distinctive Productions, 1923; Fox, 1929), *Mystic India* (Twentieth Century Fox, 1944), and *Mysterious Ceylon* (Warner Bros., 1949). In *The Young Rajah* ( Paramount, 1922) Rudolph Valentino plays a man (adopted as a child) who believes he is white. He discovers he is a long-lost Indian prince when he experiences mystical flashbacks that identify him and prove to others that he is heir to the Indian royal family whose members have been blessed by the gods with special powers. Buddhism was featured in films about China and the Far East, so there was some differentiation between Asian religions, but they were linked to specific nationalities where Buddhists lived in China and Hindus lived in India.

The second thematic thread depicts India as a foreign geographical landscape that emphasizes the differences between the poor and the wealthy. The mud-hut villages and starving natives are contrasted with the opulent palaces and forts. In films such as the *Rains of Ranchipur* (1955) and *The Rains Came* (1939), the drought-stricken fields lie next to vast, lush jungles readily available for elephant and tiger hunts and illicit romance. The desire to cross racial and class boundaries usually results in the death of characters who do so, and the repetition of this fate in subsequent narratives emphasizes that certain lines should not be crossed.

The third and most prolific theme in Hollywood films depicts the primitive hordes and rebels in the northern frontier of India (also known as the Trunk Road, which goes from India through Pakistan to Afghanistan) defying and rising up against the heroic forces of the British Indian Army. The films repeat stock characters, such as the orphaned waif, the loyal native, the religious fanatic or fakir, and the snake charmer. In *The Party*, Bakshi’s role as native who dies for his British companions references the title character from one of the most famous films in this genre, *Gunga Din* (1939). In the film, Gunga Din (played in brownface by actor Sam Jaffe) is the native water boy who is mortally wounded but manages to warn his British soldier friends of an impending attack by sounding a bugle. However, Bakshi’s exaggerated death scene not only brings humor to what was traditionally depicted as a melodramatic moment but also heralds the end of a certain type of role for Indians. The role of an Indian is no longer to save the British but rather to discard old narratives that are not relevant to the 1960s. The film establishes its “modernity” by seeing British narratives as part of the past and celebrating America as the center of entrepreneurship and capitalism. In one instance, for example, the director has to reshoot a scene because he notices Bakshi is wearing a wristwatch. The narrative is separating out the role that Bakshi plays in the film from his role as an actor in the modern era. To punctuate the point that the film is offering an alternative narrative from previous colonial stories, Bakshi literally sets off the explosives (accidently) that blow up the British fort and bring about the demise of the film. But while this narrative may be over, what is Bakshi’s role in Hollywood?

The opening of the film showcases that although the old narratives may be repeated, this film presents an alternative narrative where there is interaction between the former
native/new immigrant and mainstream populations across previously strict boundaries. In the action of the film, it is only when Bakshi is fired and dismissed from the set that the opening film credits begin to roll. What follows are images of Hrundi Bakshi playing the sitar and meditating in his garden with his pet monkey, Apu, set to a psychedelic soundtrack infused with Indian sitar music. Bakshi is transformed from a colonial subject of the British to an Indian cultural object (in the United States) that is associated with Indian spirituality and Indian music. He receives an invitation to the studio head’s party when his name is mistakenly pulled from the fired pile and put into the invitation pile. Even though Bakshi is at the party by mistake, his presence is not questioned by the guests because the “things” or Indian racial difference he offers complement American identity but do not threaten American interests.

Metaphorically, The Party focuses on what happens when South Asians get to the United States. The different ways the character is featured anticipate the complex issues associated with depicting South Asians in film and television. On one level, in the plot, the actor Bakshi is acting in a Hollywood historical epic during the British Raj. But on another level, the actor is at a party in 1968 California during the height of the black-, yellow-, and red-power movements and the escalation of the Vietnam War. The film poster, however, foregrounds the absurd elements and images in the film, including Bakshi standing in a pool of water and young people marching behind an elephant. The Indian actor is being played by a white actor in brown makeup, so even while the intent may be to shake up stereotypical roles, the film is utilizing a white man to portray the new immigrant. While the film moves easily from narratives of British imperialism to hippie culture in the 1960s, it neglects any reference to British decolonization and the emergence of the United States as a dominant world power. The film replaces British stereotypes with a revised American Orientalist model that depicts Indians (as played by non-Indians) as a model minority who do not challenge racial hierarchies. Indian participation in economic or social movements of the times is minimized and reduced to comic mannerisms.