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An Analysis of Race Portrayal in American Media

Introduction:

Racial Formation Theory, collaboratively developed by American sociologists, Michael Omi and Howard Winant, describes the idea that race is a socially constructed concept. Sociological influence stems from a colorful spectrum of sources, the most accessible of which is arguably through media. Whether it comes from a book, a daily paper, or from a digital source, such as television or the internet, media is ever-present in a vast majority of American lives today. Because of this accessibility, media has become one of the most influential sources of sociological change.

Media typically provides a unique view on society's perceptions of race at the time. In Disney's trailer for the upcoming 2014 film, "Million Dollar Arm," there are some interesting and conflicting views presented, all of which strongly conform to the idea of white superiority. Racial Formation Theory specifically breaks racism into three different aspects: structural, cultural, and interpersonal. In researching this topic, I set out to discover which of these levels are present in the film, and in what way this media source represents these ideas.

Methodology:

I originally encountered this movie trailer while out at a local theater with friends. Immediately, I saw the dynamic racial controversies present in the film, based purely on the snippet of a story presented. My primary methodologies for further research involved browsing the internet for information surrounding the premise of the film. To compare the media's representation of Indian culture to reality, I browsed the internet for scholarly articles which discussed the topic.

Interestingly, Google's movie database provided a better synopsis than the Internet Movie Database (IMDB.com). I confirmed the validity of Google's synopsis by comparing it to Disney's own, and although they are not word-for-word identical, the message and meaning are the same.

YouTube was my primary source for reviewing the video, as it provided the content in a much more accessible way than my original source, a movie theater. In the comments section of the YouTube page for this trailer, a number of viewers commented on the very-apparent racist nature of the film trailer, with one user stating that *"This film should be called White Guilt 2. In typical Hollywood fashion this film will show once again that only white people can save minorities from their own devices."* (Username: "Superman", [YouTube.com](https://www.youtube.com)) This user actually brought an excellent point to the table, regarding cultural racism, which will be discussed in further detail.

Findings:

The premise of the story is that the protagonist, JB Bernstein, once a successful sports agent, finds himself out of viable business when competitors steal his last player. If our notably Caucasian "hero" is not able to find a solution for his business's economic

issues, he will be forced to shut down. Bernstein is inspired, one late evening, while dozing in front of the television, which was showing an Indian cricket match. He decides he will try to find the next *“baseball pitching sensation”* (Google) in India, and hosts an India-wide contest to find the fastest pitchers.

One YouTube user mentioned that, *“... once again, only white people can save minorities from their own devices.”* (Username: “Superman”, YouTube.com) and this hits one aspect of cultural racism on the head. American majorities seem to have it lodged in their minds that the rest of the world needs saving, and that white America is the one best suited to accomplish this. Not only is this world view conceited, but also quite racist. Better living standards are by no way determined by the color of one’s skin. Any statistical evidence that suggests such the opposite is clearly not accounting for the existence of structural racism, and its role in the world today.

Structural racism is rampant in this media source. In the first 30 seconds of the trailer, the overarching conflict is revealed; Bernstein loses his last sports professional to another team of agents. While this, on its own, may not present itself as anything unusual or racially



Sports professional, celebrating new business with Bernstein’s competitor-sports agents.

controversial, it is important to note that this

last player was portrayed with multiple tattoos, was not caucasian, and the agents with whom he now worked were both clearly white.

Cultural racism was also a prevalent factor in the portrayal of the Indian young adults. This movie makes a point of describing the kids coming from a poor, overpopulated, unindustrialized, and technologically ignorant village in India. When the



Indian kids in awe of the elevator's automatic doors.

kids are brought to America, they are stereotypically baffled by the automatic doors, despite the fact that a majority of India is, in reality, much more modernized than the film's portrayal of the country.

Another scenario of cultural racism presented by the trailer lies in the kids' perception of women. When they first see Bernstein's soon-to-be girlfriend, they mutter to each other, wondering if she is the household servant. Needless to say this is an exceptionally sexist statement, but it also attributes to the American perception of Indian-villager intelligence. While there most certainly exist overwhelming cultural differences between Indians and Americans, I believe the movie achieved this portrayal completely backwards.

Women in India have virtually never been widely perceived as a subordinate gender in their own culture,



The kids, awkwardly observing Bernstein's significant other through a glass-paneled wall.

quite unlike women in America. In a paper titled "Status of Women in Indian Society" by

Dr. Rekha Singh, the author states the following: *“According to ancient Hindu scriptures no religious rite can be performed with perfection by a man without the participation of his wife. Wife's participation is essential to any religious rite.”* Dr. Singh’s paper chronologically address women’s roles in India, and around the European medieval era, India was in it’s *“Muslim period... ”*, during which, women were *“... deprived of their rights of equality with men. They were compelled to keep themselves within the four walls of their houses with a long veil on their faces.”* This view of women changed, however, as a direct result of Mahatma Gandhi. As Dr. Singh explains this societal pivot, *“... it was only under the enlightened leadership of Mahatma Gandhi that they re-asserted their equality with men.”*

Conclusion:

While the movie presents viewers with a tale of the misguided underdog discovering a better version of himself through charity, it ignores the underlying message completely. By presenting Indian kids as uneducated, ignorant and in need of rescue, they are establishing a cultural stereotype, which is effectively practicing cultural racism. Structural racism was also a large part of the film trailer, emphasized by the pure fact that the protagonist and his companion are white, and everyone who works for Bernstein are not.

References:

1) **Disney**

- <http://movies.disney.com/million-dollar-arm>

2) **Google**, with search query: "Million Dollar Arm"

- <https://www.google.com/#q=million+dollar+arm>

3) **IMDB.com**

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4) "Status of Women in Indian Society", **Dr. Rekha Singh**

- <https://www.bu.edu/wcp/Papers/Huma/HumaSing.htm>

5) **YouTube**, with search query: "Million Dollar Arm Trailer"

- http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EiC8o7i_ZqE