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Ethnic Literature 2

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Asians Belong Center Stage Too

Having participated in community theatre for the majority of my childhood, I was ecstatic to see South Asian culture on the stage in a touring production of Aladdin. Despite Aladdin showing Arabic culture, I appreciated the similarities it had to Indian culture. As soon as the actors took their bows, I hurried to the side of the theatre excited to meet Jasmine at the stage door. When she came out, I was met with disappointment as she was not of South Asian descent, neither was most of the cast. I had and still have, virtually no stage actresses to look up to as a young Indian woman. Asians are misrepresented and excluded from roles in American theatre, therefore contributing to ignorance about important perspectives and reluctant participation of Asian Americans in the performing arts.

Theatre has utilized the dehumanization and caricatures of marginalized races since its origin in vaudeville. Vaudeville was a popular form of variety entertainment including dancers, magicians, acrobats, and more. As rapid industrialization and innovation lead to higher rates of immigration to the United States, entertainment became yet another opportunity to add to the melting pot of America. Vaudeville in America used various forms of racist practices, including blackface, as mediums of entertainment (Vale). This normalized taking advantage of people of color, and showcased them to the public as comedic exhibitions rather than talented individuals. While interest surrounding vaudeville faded, the attachment to racist ideology persisted throughout live performing arts. As analyzed specifically in the context of Asian-Americans, author Esther Lee in her publication “A History of Asian American Theatre'' said, “The first relationship American theatre established with Asia and Asianness was founded on exoticism and voyeurism” (Lee, Esther). Aspects of Asian people’s culture were selectively chosen depending on which seemed most “interesting” or “glamorous” to be put on stage. Racism was a significant aspect in the origin of theatre in America, allowing for select ideologies to stay consistent despite overall progress in the arts.

American theatre, although having improved its minority representation, still falls behind in its efforts towards involving Asian-Americans. In the 2015-2016 Broadway season, 36% of casted actors were a part of a marginalized group, yet only 5% were Asian (Fuchs). With this major lack of representation, entertainment is not able to offer an accurate depiction of the real American population. Entertainment is a highly utilized resource, especially for young audiences, to help develop their opinions and consideration for others. Without exposure to a diverse cast, people will be unable to collaborate and integrate with those who have different perspectives than them. In addition to exposure, the theatre industry lacks plays and musicals that provide insight into the Asian-American experience. “It’s taken a long time for African-American and Latino actors to get to a level where roles are being written for them—but right now, for South Asian and Southeast Asian actors, roles are still not being written for us,” says actor Vishaal Reddy says in an interview for Playbill (Clement). There are barely any roles popular amongst the theatre community that portray Asian actors, and when there are, they adhere to harmful stereotypes about the group. Though *Miss Saigon* is centered around a Japanese woman, it shows her value and identity only concerning her love interest, a white man. She is also oversexualized, which has roots in white men objectifying and fetishizing Asian women rather than viewing them as capable beings. As an Asian woman who has attended many auditions, I have never come across a role designed for an Asian (or South Asian) woman, which has been quite discouraging. Especially because white women are always the ingenue, I felt villainized by every casting director. An artistic team that lacks the diversity showcased in the art can lead to detrimental impacts on the final production. If white cisgender male directors are chosen for a diverse theatrical piece, inevitably, they will not be able to create a fully bias-free and multi-perspective cast and interpretation of the playwrights' story (Brewer). Diversity in positions of power are necessary for institutional change in the discriminatory practices of theatre in America.

Asian-Americans are discouraged from pursuing careers other than those which are STEM-related due to expectations the United States has for immigrants, including the model minority myth. The ideologies enforced on immigrant parents have often been reflected in their methods of parenting and the priorities set for their children’s life. Engineering and medicine were considered the most respectable careers because they produced the most income. For immigrant parents, financial stability was most valuable because they struggled with it during the immigration process (Lee, Julia). Although there is nothing wrong with entering a STEM field, the problem lies where young Asians don’t feel like they have the freedom to enter a profession they are genuinely passionate about. Additionally, throughout their lives, they are expected to excel academically simply due to preconceived notions about Asians. This immense pressure to live up to expectations has added to the reason there is an inadequate amount of Asians in artistic fields. They are taught that pursuing a STEM field is the only way to achieve success, and that they are failures and under-achievers if they don’t want to. This often translates into internalized oppression, where young-adult Asians reject their cultural identity because of their desire to pursue something that deviates from the stereotype (Lee, Jennifer). The aspirations and future plans of young Asian Americans are unfairly swayed away from the arts, due to both internal and external bias against non-STEM professions.

Asian-American artists have found methods of liberation and resistance to fight for their representation and deserved roles in American theatre. Despite discrimination against Asians in theatre still being prominent, there has been immense progress from vaudeville-type racist entertainment. This progress was led by Asian-Americans in the 1960s, who founded theatres and became playwrights, actors, set designers, and directors. They made their opportunities without assistance from white lead institutions and began to show the importance and beauty of Asian American theatre and artistic expression (“Asian Americans: Theatre”). By demonstrating the possibilities of diverse theatre and showing persistence, they fought their way into theatre, disregarding the bias the industry had against them. These methods paved the way for modern Asian American-led theatre, where people have used plays and musicals as a method of fighting oppression and anti-Asian hate. Ralph Peña, the artistic director for Ma-Yi Theater Company explained, “We tell Asian stories from Asian artists, with Asian agency and centering Asian lives, therefore humanizing Asian lives. That’s our function. And so when we do that, it’s harder to choke somebody on the subway until they’re unconscious” (Tran). Besides the inherent importance of diversity in theatre, theatre is a medium in which progressive ideas and a variety of racial (and other identities) perspectives can be communicated. By seeing someone play a character on stage that communicates their experience and emotions, people can better understand or at least make an effort to understand, when they leave the theatre. In addition to Asian-led theatre companies, National Theatre has taken initiative to implement diversity into their productions. National Theatre is a British theatre organization funded by the Arts Council England and NESTA (National Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts). They have set goals for diversity and inclusion, and their efforts are visible through their productions, as most productions have a cast consisting of people from various identities. By observing various countries, organizations, and individuals that have implemented lasting improvements, American theatre can use similar methods to spark change in the United States.

Storytelling is an extraordinary way to enlighten and introduce people of all ages and identities to a variety of concepts and perspectives. A study conducted by Ekua Hagan, Jamil Zaki, and Leor Hackel in the Journal of Experimental Social Psychology, found that attending these plays increased empathy for people depicted in them and changed people’s political attitudes about a variety of issues related to the show, such as income inequality (Hagen). Both the audience and the company are advantages when theatre is used as a medium of cultural expression and education. By displaying Asian characters who go through discriminations, microaggressions, and stereotypes, we give a voice to Asian people in the real world. On a smaller, but still significant scale, diversity in theatre helps Asian actors (and theatre technicians) feel appreciated for their entire identity. Pooja Ghai explains her experience in South Asian theatre company Tamasha, as she says, “They were telling stories that encapsulated migrant, colonial and postcolonial experiences and I thought ‘*This* is why I want to do what I’m doing.’ I’d found a space for telling stories that mattered” (Akbar). It is vital for theatre-goers and people in theatre to push casting directors towards diversity, and leave the way for Asian playwrights, directors, and actors to showcase their talents that have been silenced for so long. Being a South Asian actor in the United States, I have not yet found a space in which I have had access to an abundance of South Asian characters. I look forward to feeling the same joy I felt when I played the Bangladeshi character Zubaida Ula in *The Laramie Project*, and the amazement of when I saw a South Asian man play a queer Benvolio in National Theatre’s *Romeo and Juliet*.

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