

**SICKENING FANTASIES AND THE SUBDUED OTHER: *THE BIG SICK***

by

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## Abstract

South Asian Muslim characters leading ordinary, yet complex lives somehow remain uncharted territory in popular Hollywood cinema. Even in 2017, when *The Big Sick* was released, there were only a handful of films with representations of South Asian Muslims and most of those were set around predisposed concepts of Islamophobia, terrorism, and tales of socio-cultural conflicts between Muslims and liberal ideologies. This thesis considers how *The Big Sick* breaks a pattern of long-standing Muslim male underrepresentation in Hollywood, while also making the lives and existence of South Asian Muslim women as human beings with free will and agency almost unimaginable. It also draws upon a range of critical and popular commentary to understand how the film's representations selectively humanize only some members of the South Asian community and challenges the popular reception of the film as a new and path-breaking work of inclusive cinema. This thesis contends that the narrative of the film as well its reception history are crucial sites to understand the intersecting social and cultural politics of Muslim South Asian representation in contemporary Hollywood cinema.

## Lay Summary

*The Big Sick* (2017) is a romantic comedy that features an interracial love story. The film's critical and commercial success bears significance, especially during the presidency of Donald Trump in the United States with his disapproval of ethnic Muslim-Americans and immigrants. This master's thesis analyzes the narrative of *The Big Sick* with a focus on its representation of South Asian Muslims, especially the female characters in the film and contends that the film stays true to the typical Hollywood portrayals of Muslims as backward people in need of approval and salvation. Such findings are significant because they challenge the critical and popular reception of the film, which finds the film's representation work refreshing and a sign of a growingly inclusive and multicultural atmosphere in Hollywood cinema. The thesis pays special attention to the views of mostly South Asian commentators writing for blogs and alternative media platforms, who contend that the film minimizes its South Asian Muslim female characters.

## Table of Contents

<b>Abstract.....</b>	<b>iii</b>
<b>Lay Summary .....</b>	<b>iv</b>
<b>Table of Contents .....</b>	<b>v</b>
<b>Acknowledgements .....</b>	<b>vii</b>
<b>Dedication .....</b>	<b>ix</b>
<b>Chapter 1: Introduction .....</b>	<b>1</b>
1.1 Plot Overview .....	2
1.2 Reception and Cultural Contexts .....	3
1.3 Methodology .....	6
1.4 Chapter Overview .....	10
<b>Chapter 2: Romantic Comedies, <i>The Big Sick</i> and a Successful Hollywood Formula .....</b>	<b>15</b>
2.1 <i>The Big Sick's</i> Attempted Re-imagination of Pakistani "Others" .....	16
2.2 The Ghost of <i>The Jazz Singer</i> (1927) .....	22
2.3 <i>The Big Sick</i> as a Romantic Comedy .....	24
2.4 A Media Darling .....	34
<b>Chapter 3: Brown Eyes, White Gaze and the Saviour Complexes in <i>The Big Sick</i> .....</b>	<b>39</b>
3.1 The One-man Show .....	39
3.2 The Good, the Bad and the American Muslim Man .....	48
3.3 The Fantasies of the White Saviour Complex .....	54
<b>Chapter 4: South Asian Visibility on Screen and the Duality of Receptions .....</b>	<b>59</b>
4.1 <i>The Big Sick</i> : A (White) American Critic's Choice .....	61
4.2 Beholders of the Oppositional Gaze .....	64

4.3	White Women Saving Brown Men from Brown Women .....	72
<b>Chapter 5: Conclusion.....</b>		<b>76</b>
<b>Works Cited .....</b>		<b>80</b>

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## **Dedication**

For abbu, ammu and Shoikot: the brightest stars of my tiny galaxy.

## Introduction

*The Big Sick*, a 2017 romantic comedy, is a fictional adaptation of the real-life romance between its co-screenplay writers, Emily V. Gordon and Kumail Nanjiani, which follows the duo's journey as an interracial couple in America. Nanjiani<sup>1</sup> plays a version of himself in the film, while Zoe Kazan portrays Gordon who is identified by the film as Emily Gardner. The film is about the couple's budding love, a catastrophic ailment, and the cultural tensions between the two individuals and their respective families, which ultimately subdues and leads the couple to an implied happy ending. This thesis considers the film primarily as a narrative work, and through a chapter each on its genre, narrative, and reception, examines how *The Big Sick* exists strangely both as a film hailed for its inclusivity and interest in South Asian experiences while also reducing and neglecting the complexities of South Asian immigrant lives, especially those of women.

This thesis scrutinizes *The Big Sick* for its contemporary onscreen representations of racialized people, particularly South Asian and Muslim communities, to unpack and consider the impact of such representations upon a wide and diverse range of contemporary audiences. This thesis challenges those who would celebrate *The Big Sick* for its inclusivity and considers instead

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<sup>1</sup> For the purposes of this thesis and his subjectivity to the plot and its onscreen portrayal, Kumail Nanjiani, the actor and co-author of the screenplay is referred to as "Nanjiani" and the character he plays in the film is referred to as "Kumail." The same method applies to Emily Gordon; the co-author and the person will be referred to as "Gordon," and the character of Emily Gardner in the film, will be mentioned as "Emily." All the other characters of this film will be referred to by their character's first name.

the limitations to the perfunctory work of inclusion that has become popular in Hollywood after new media social justice campaigns like #OscarsSoWhite<sup>2</sup>.

## **1.1 Plot Overview**

Within the first few minutes of the film, Kumail and Emily meet in a Chicago comedy club where Kumail, a Pakistani-American comedian performs. They start going out with each other, until Emily starts to develop an unremitting sickness, which leads for her to confront Kumail about his hesitance around their relationship. The pair fights and goes on to a break until Kumail receives an emergency call from one of Emily's friends that she is in a hospital and needs someone beside her. Kumail visits her in the hospital only to find that her sudden and mysterious illness is forcing the doctors to put her in a medically induced coma to stabilize her, and Kumail ends up signing the authorization letter as her next of kin. He informs Emily's parents of her condition and the coma, and even after they arrive to care for her, Kumail hangs around the hospital with them. Emily's parents, especially her mother, is sour towards Kumail as he broke Emily's heart and her trust, but the trio keep sharing the unprecedented time together as the doctors try to determine Emily's ailment. Kumail eventually warms up to Emily's parents, while distancing himself from his own family. Emily regains her consciousness but is unaware of the affection her parents have developed for Kumail while she was in a coma. Kumail confesses

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<sup>2</sup> Launched in 2015 by April Reign after the Academy Awards had nominated and awarded Oscars to mostly White people, #OscarSoWhite has since been influential in raising social and new media protest and awareness around the lack of inclusivity and diversity in mainstream Hollywood (Ugwu).

his true love for Emily, by denouncing and burning the pictures of all the Pakistani women that his mother had ever brought in for him for a potential arranged marriage. Emily remains unsure, as Kumail moves to New York with his fellow aspiring comedians to pursue his career. His mother does not approve of his decision to move nor his feelings for Emily. The film ends with Kumail performing at a New York club while Emily surprises him in the audience. The end credits show the real wedding pictures of Nanjiani and Gordon, and their celebrations with both of their families.

## **1.2 *The Big Sick*'s Reception and its Cultural Contexts**

*The Big Sick*'s comparatively diverse South Asian cast resembles what Ashley Doane identifies as Hollywood's trend of attempting contemporary, colourblind production. Colourblindness, according to her, is "the claim that race no longer 'matters' in the United States, that racism is no longer a significant obstacle to the advancement of peoples of colo[u]r" (Doane 15). The South Asian cast, even with acclaimed actors like Bollywood's Anupam Kher and Britain's Adeel Akhtar, remain as the opposing, almost villainous force blocking the way to happiness for the central couple. Nanjiani, in his multiple media appearances during the promotional stages of the film, mentioned how his father was elated to have Kher play him on the screen, and how his parents were very proud of the film, his career, his success and his relationship with his wife, even though the film unfortunately fails to display that loving and accepting side of the Nanjiani family (Cornish and Yu). The onscreen depiction of the Nanjiani parents in the film remain fictionalized as the people unwilling to accept his career as a comedian and his relationship with a White, non-Muslim, non-Pakistani woman. In his interview with

Stephen Colbert, Nanjiani confirms this information (“Kumail Nanjiani Bonded with His Wife's Parents during Her Coma” 0:02-7:28). However, the interview remains focused on the fact that Hollywood veterans, Holly Hunter, and Ray Romano, play the onscreen versions of Nanjiani’s parents-in-law, who are present in the audience for this interview. The interview also features the clip with the 9/11 joke (*The Big Sick*, 51:20-52:59) that has been prominently featured in the trailers and promotions of the film. This is the scene where Terry Gardner, played by Ray Romano, asks Kumail about 9/11 in an awkward, hospital cafeteria conversation, and Kumail jokes that, “We have lost 19 of our best men” (*The Big Sick*, 51:20-52:59). Following the Gardners’ reaction to this ill-timed joke, Kumail attempts to save the conversation by saying, “It’s not funny to joke about it.” The scene hints at the dynamic shared between Kumail and Emily’s parents in the film. Kumail’s continual attempts to seek approval of Emily’s parents and the development of their relationship take up a significant amount of screen time, while the film does not include any scenes of Emily’s interactions with Kumail’s parents, due to Kumail hiding Emily from his immigrant parents’ assumed disapproval. In an interview with the National Public Radio (NPR) podcast, *Fresh Air* with David Bianculli, Nanjiani mentions how he thinks he had not given enough credit to his parents, especially his mother, for evolving and accepting his relationship with his then girlfriend and now wife, Gordon, and for always checking-in with him during Gordon’s coma days (Bianculli).

As I will examine in the chapters that follow, new media activists and writers, mostly women of colour of South Asian and/or Muslim origins, have challenged these representations of South Asian peoples in a manner that suggests that the cultural accomplishments of the film need to be understood in a context that is wider than just the film itself. Briefly, Aditi Natasha Kini writes that she is tired of, “[...] onscreen depiction of a [B]rown man wanting to date a [W]hite

woman, while [B]rown women are portrayed alternately as caricatures, stereotypes, inconsequential, and/or the butts of a joke” (Kini). She is not the only one trying to point out the problems with such a framing of young, South Asian women and my research examines this archive of responses to the film, in order to explore how the cultural effects of this film must also include the wider conversations that it has generated. These bloggers, online activists and writers of colour have expressed their frustration and disappointments around the depiction of racialized characters and have questioned if it was absolutely necessary to turn the South Asian, immigrant, Muslim family into the comical, disposable antagonists, especially in such a mainstream, popular production, which is inspired by real-life events.

In the only recent peer-reviewed article to deal with the film to date, Peter Gottschalk characterizes the film and the problems it offers as an inclusive project. Gottschalk does not dive deeply into the visual attributes of the film, but offers a narrative analysis of Muslim representations in Hollywood films and very briefly addresses the film by noting,

*The Big Sick* cannot rise beyond the demands of exceptional citizenship. Contrary to many anti-Muslim assumptions, in most scenes Kumail effortlessly engages with non-Muslim, non-South Asian Americans in a manner that wordlessly asserts his place in the American social fabric (392).

Gottschalk’s appreciation for the film is shared by other commentators, as I will explore in subsequent chapters. The presence of this reception regarding the film’s representation of South Asian characters in *The Big Sick* is the primary reason that this thesis examines not only the North American media responses, but also the merits of the film as a contemporary “fresh take” on romantic comedy. Gottschalk’s argument risks normalizing injurious representations and this

thesis is inspired by the discourse that has emerged online to discuss the current trends and projects of South Asian and Muslim visibility in North American films and television.

### 1.3 Methodology

My approach is to analyze primarily the narrative, promotional interviews and appearances, and responses to the film, and I will look deeply into the onscreen presence of certain characters and incidents that work as a foundation of how South Asian representation is to be perceived in the film. For example, the film frames the Brown, Muslim, Pakistani family as the stereotypical other to American life without providing much space onscreen for them to convey their side of the story beyond their obvious difference from White America, except for a few moments in which glimpses of their struggles in a foreign culture are highlighted. In the scene where Kumail finally confesses his truth to his very concerned and agitated parents, and Azmat, his father, played by Kher, shares a rare hint of his sacrifices to adapt in America as an older graduate student, leaving his secured job and life in Pakistan, “I was in my mid-50s and they [other students] were in their 20s. They used to call me Father Time” (*The Big Sick*, 1:24:12-1:24:17). It is safe to say that to keep up with the theme of a romantic comedy, the film, and its official promotion in American media focuses on the 1.5 generation<sup>3</sup>, assimilated Muslim male’s experience of America, while avoiding a deeper look into the life of the first-generation immigrant father’s struggles. There is no harm in focusing on the central couple and their

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<sup>3</sup> A 1.5 generation immigrant or 1.5G is usually a person who was born in one country and had immigrated to another country in the early and/or by the teen years of their lives (Hao and Han).

journey to live up to the expectations of the film's genre. The complications arise when the film is simply not just about the couple, but also about the relationship between the parents of Emily and Kumail during her days in a coma, while Kumail's relationship with his parents and family remains by comparison understated and that exudes a racial double standard that the film naturalizes.

This thesis draws upon Matthew Hughey's approach in his book *The White Savior Film: Content, Critics, and Consumption* (2014) (as a sociologist and not a film scholar) in which he offers a comparative narrative analysis to demonstrate how the plots of so many Hollywood films use the White saviour trope<sup>4</sup>. This approach will help to understand how the film uses the trope of the White saviour and how its narrative structure naturalizes Islamophobia. The methodology focuses on the analysis of not only narrative and tropes but the film's marketing and reception, which are shaped by these tropes; it employs post-colonial theories to illuminate the film's silences and tensions beyond the screen. While Jack Shaheen's unparalleled work, famously in *Reel Bad Arabs* (2015) on the American Orientalism<sup>5</sup> in visual media is an inspiration for the study of the contemporary phase of Islamophobia, this thesis extends that

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<sup>4</sup> While I take inspiration from Hughey's work and approach, I do not particularly follow his extensive method of analyzing a wide range of Hollywood films for his major and important work in decoding the trope of White saviour narratives, as I focus and work with only one film, *The Big Sick*.

<sup>5</sup> "Orientalism" is a term theorized and popularized by Edward W. Said, who had several ways of describing the potential meaning of it. One of Said's definition of 'Orientalism' considers the term "[...] as a Western style for dominating restructuring and having authority over the Orient" (11).



analysis to *The Big Sick* in order to consider how Orientalist discourse structured popular reception of it.

The onscreen Mrs. Nanjiani as the disparaging mother with no sympathy towards Kumail and Emily's relationship also inspires this study to exist. She becomes the embodied ideal of Pakistan as backwards, disapproving, and inflexible. Literary critic, Northrop Frye, in his *The Anatomy of Criticism* (1957), has this to say of blocking characters' roles in comic narrative, "The humorous blocking characters of comedy are nearly always impostors, though it is more frequently a lack of self-knowledge than simple hypocrisy that characterizes them" (172). The film categorizes itself as a romantic comedy and the first chapter looks at it with the help of Freidman and his co-authors' work (2015). Mrs. Nanjiani is the classic blocking character in this romantic comedy as a strict, bossy, and belligerent mother, and her son must flee from her into the arms of Emily and her family who embody the kind American inclusive secular values. She is also a Pakistani immigrant mother, a very rare representation on any Hollywood screen, who appears as this heartless, conservative, one-dimensional woman who does not see her son for who he is. She appears incapable of any growth as a character throughout the development of the film, which adds to the discussion of South Asian female representation that this thesis tackles. To establish Mrs. Nanjiani as the key blocking character, the film features a subplot where she attempts to find a suitable match for her son in marriage, and rallies up a group of young, single Pakistani women who end up getting rejected by him every single time, as her son fails to be honest with his mother about his disinterest in such an arrangement. Mrs. Nanjiani thus becomes not only a clueless mother, but also an insensitive Pakistani woman, who seems unfazed by a practice that treats the women of her culture as an object and marriage material. This situation establishes Kumail's disassociation with his family's, and especially his mother's Pakistani

mindset, and the film rides on this idea of presenting the Pakistani women in a light that is nothing but a caricature of their existence.

This thesis thus consults the works of feminist, critical race, and cultural studies scholars to analyse the impact of designing Muslim, immigrant, South Asian, especially female characters as the blocking ones in the script. Sara Ahmed's multiple notable works on immigrant experiences and feminist discourse contribute to shaping the framework of this study, while bell hooks' scholarship around challenging the hegemonic gaze as an audience of colour informs the analysis of the reception of the film. Stuart Hall's encoding and decoding theory of communication in broadcast media (1973) also offers a strong guideline in studying the receptions. I also use Gayatri Spivak's famous, still relevant, and often revised essay (1984, 2010) that continues contributing to the contemporary conversations, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" to trace the trope of painting a character of colour in a certain light of ignorance back to the colonial practices. The approach taken in this thesis extends and complicates the insights from conversations around visible minority representations in Hollywood, to ask how the Muslim characters, besides Kumail Nanjiani's in the film remain stubbornly outside of the "American social fabric" even in 2017, as misfits and buffoons, and uncovers the role that gender plays in this dynamic. While this thesis is not an extensive study of Islamophobia, it is, however, a careful analysis of one particular film and its impact on a certain socio-political context as an example and way of understanding how the diversity projects of Hollywood remain reductive and reproduce old and tired tropes, in the guise of a prescribed modern, colourblind and inclusive agenda. The context, the characters, the dialogues, and the settings of the scenes in the film provide the primary and concrete elements of that discussion. My analysis of the film has a focus on the narrative with limited incorporations of the visual elements to address the key

issues this thesis examines. In the second chapter particularly, I work with key scenes (the one-man show, for example) where snippets of the visuals come naturally in the discussion and analysis of the narrative work. *The Big Sick* and its central filmic elements with mise-en-scene, editing, etc. appear to be in line with the typical Hollywood tropes of popular films, including romantic comedies, where the conflict resolves, and the main characters find what they were looking for. I, therefore, use a predominantly narrative analysis of the film with considerations of the visuals when deemed necessary for the purpose of this thesis.

## **1.4 Chapter Overview**

There is a certain risk in critiquing humorous work such as *The Big Sick*, as it can be taken as a lack of understanding of the humour itself. This thesis, however, is not so much critiquing the humour, but what is underlying in the narrative, and how it resonates beyond the screen. To examine how the film follows the existing Hollywood tropes, the first chapter of this master's thesis considers the film and its production as a part of the background study. To begin that process, I look at how *The Big Sick* positions the Nanjianis as the blocking characters first. I then delve into the apparent "originality" of the film and its apparent inclusivity. I compare the film to *The Jazz Singer* (1927), Hollywood's first commercially produced sound film, in terms of both their content and social impact on advancing an assimilationist agenda while rejecting the rest of their ethnic communities. Next, I analyze the film in terms of the Hollywood romantic comedy genre features the film accommodates, alters and/or challenges. In addition, I also investigate the film's marketing strategy and promotional apparatus to understand how this film has been promoted as a refreshing break from the monotonous romantic comedies. I also

examine the film as a typical Judd Apatow production, which has been a trademark for the films the director-producer has been associated with throughout his career. The first chapter identifies the film's genre and its potentials and limitations, as well as the creative and commercial packaging to prepare for the discussion in the following chapter that focuses on the placement of the migrant experiences as the secondary and disposable element of the plotline.

To investigate the ways the film flattens South Asian characters and culture, in the second chapter, I analyze a selection of scenes that tantalizingly operate on the margins of the romcom's narrative to document Muslim experiences in America, to understand how the film establishes distinctions between American and South Asian cultures. The next section in the chapter then turns to consider how both the internal and external frameworks of the film produce a set of meanings and regulate the power dynamics of its diverse cast. I extend Sara Ahmed's work on happiness and migration in her chapter "Melancholic Migrants" from her book *The Promise of Happiness* (2010) to understand how the concept functions for the film's Brown characters, through Kumail's detached navigation around his immigrant experiences and relationships. I also draw upon Matthew Hughey's work on White saviour films to examine the film's treatment of its characters of colour and diaspora. I extend this analysis to study the nature of the White saviour trope and how it singles Kumail Nanjiani's character out as an aspiring American in need to be salvaged from his backward culture by the liberal accepting America, embodied by Emily and her parents. The analysis in this chapter explores how Kumail's exceptional model minority masculinity serves as a foil against Brown-Muslim culture.

The third chapter aims to explore the question: why did certain writers and critics respond so differently from film critics of major print media in North America? It unpacks the South Asian female spectatorship in particular in order to better understand how the cultural effects of

the film are not confined to its normative and disappointing articulations of prejudice. I begin with applying Stuart Hall's work on encoding and decoding mass media as an introductory framework for the chapter, to understand the hegemonic, negotiated and counter-hegemonic/oppositional readings of the film and of its media commentators. The chapter moves forward to unpack the tensions that emerge between North American responses, primarily, with some British reviews as a comparison point, which work to, "reproduce the dominant definitions precisely by bracketing their hegemonic quality and operating instead with displaced professional codings" (Hall 171). I examine responses to the film that tend to appear in two distinct archives: film reviews in major publications praising the film, and the independent blogs and websites raising concerns over the film. Christine Caruana identifies how "laughter challenges the prescribed roles of the victims and the oppressor by placing the victim in the role of the objective outsider" (197), in her chapter "'What Can't Be Cured Must Be Endured': The Postcolonial Humour of Salman Rushdie, Sami Shah and Hari Kondabolu." While I would love to adopt Caruana's generous approach in reading *The Big Sick* as a hilarious noble attempt to bridge culture and decolonize hate, I find myself leaning towards a different direction based on the evidence around the bifurcated responses on the film; for one set of viewers the romcom delivers comedy, and for another set, it delivers a tired violent cultural script. The reception of *The Big Sick* discussed in this chapter considers the veneer of inclusion in the film and examines who is it not funny for and why. In doing so, I take refuge in the work of Gayatri Spivak introduced in her essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (2010) by considering how this apparently original film has only slightly altered a cultural script that has historically suggested that "[W]hite men are saving [B]rown women from [B]rown men" (Spivak 48-49), in their colonial efforts to civilize the other. In *The Big Sick*, we see now that White women and their parents are

saving Brown men from Brown women. bell hooks' work on female spectatorship in which she argues, "Even when representations of [B]lack women were present in film, our bodies and being were there to serve-to enhance and maintain [W]hite womanhood" (291) inspires the argument of the chapter around Brown spectatorship. I also refer to Sara Ahmed's work on affect, in her essay "Affective Economics" (2004) to examine the responses by the non-White female audience of the film. For this section, I have considered the online and published responses, reactions, and reviews of the film, both from the dominant media and the independent, new media outlets. This chapter is influenced by select ideas of the theorists mentioned here to inform the analysis of the South Asian spectatorship of *The Big Sick*.

The conclusion of this thesis settles the discussions offered and built through the first three chapters and posits the potential questions that remain unanswered and unexplored, while summing up the key findings of the work in terms of thinking about neo-colonial popular American culture *vis a vis* the Muslim identity. The conclusion reflects on how certain voices of diversity in American popular culture have been making it to the mainstream in the era of #MeToo, especially during the Trump presidency. While trying to imagine the impact of the study, the conclusion tries to emphasize the dangers of accepting injurious representations of "common people" of the minority groups, especially Muslim women of South Asian origins.

This thesis examines the vexing significance of the film which features a South Asian leading actor yet also deploys a logic of the White saviour and offers representations of the racial 'Other' that caricature South Asian women through the display of a certain Islamophobic misogyny. In response to such complexity, my thesis asks, how has *The Big Sick* become a film that simultaneously challenges and propagates anti-Muslim norms while attempting to offer Muslim presence on mainstream Hollywood screen? What is the nature of the film's complex

desire to share yet denigrate aspects of South Asian Muslim culture and how does this manifest itself in the film? Significantly, my research finds that the reception of the film intensified and confounded these operations in ways that suggest the cultural work of the film as a source of positive visibility of everyday South Asian and Muslim lives is only partially accomplished during its run-time on screen.

## Romantic Comedies, *The Big Sick* and a Successful Hollywood Formula

As a cultural event, *The Big Sick* belongs to a set of circumstances that are larger than just the retelling of a real-life love story, thanks in part to its production team. *The Big Sick* is directed by Michael Showalter and produced by Judd Apatow of Apatow Productions, Barry Mendel<sup>6</sup>, and FilmNation Entertainment<sup>7</sup>. After the well-praised and successful premiere at the 2017 Sundance Festival, Amazon Studios bought the distribution rights for the film and partnered with Lionsgate for theater release in the summer. This film went from a small idea between two people to a popular culture production as a Judd Apatow brand and the face of Amazon, poised to move from a global marketplace to generating content for its studio to feed its Prime Video subscribers. This chapter considers the nature of the film's representation of the Brown Muslim family by considering the film itself – including the opening scene – as well as the production history of the film, the nuances of the genre, and the eerie parallels with almost-a-century-old film produced in Hollywood with comparable racial tensions and assimilation dilemmas. The film offers a complex set of social, political, economic, narrative, and generic concerns that shape these representations, and this chapter is an attempt to understand how these operate separately and collectively.

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<sup>6</sup> American producer Barry Mendel has produced Academy Awards nominated films like *The Sixth Sense* (1999), and *Munich* (2005). He has collaborated with Apatow before in producing projects like *Funny People* (2009), *Bridesmaids* (2011), *This is 40* (2012), *Trainwreck* (2015) and *The King of Staten Island* (2020) (barrymendel.com).

<sup>7</sup> FilmNation Entertainment has been producing independent films “that emphasize both creative integrity and commercial appeal,” like the Academy Awards winner film *Arrival* (2016) (filmnation.com).



## 2.1 *The Big Sick's* Attempted Re-imagination of Pakistani “Others”

The fictionalized story of the “couple in love” in this film starts with an “woo-hoo” sort of heckling in a Chicago comedy club where Kumail has been a struggling stand-up comedian. The story soon takes an unusual turn to a medically induced coma for Emily, as she lies unconscious and fights an unknown disease. During her coma, Kumail comes to realize how he loves this now-unconscious woman and wants to marry her, while passing this difficult time with her parents and his own family in parallel situations. He tries to navigate the social and familial tensions regarding this interracial relationship, which he has kept hidden from his parents. While Kumail stays true to his original identity on screen, Gordon’s last name is slightly changed in the script. Emily Gordon becomes Emily Gardner in the reel version and actress Zoe Kazan plays the part opposite to Nanjiani playing himself. In a *People* magazine interview, Gordon emphasizes how this decision to modify her last name or cast Kazan, an actress, for the role has been one decision she disagreed with her husband when they were workshoping the script. While Nanjiani, a performer himself, is confident with his original identity to be represented, Gordon claims to be a bit more reserved than her husband as she tells *People*, “I’m maybe a bit more private than Kumail so I was definitely like, ‘Oh s—, if all this goes great, I’m gonna be on a red carpet being like, and yes, I was in a coma!’... That’s kind of a weird thing but hopefully the benefits of it can outweigh the weirdness of it — cause it definitely is weird” (Russian). Her reason behind the skepticism as she shares in the interview is that she was the one who went through a coma, a very physically traumatic experience. The film’s plot, however, arguably with Nanjiani’s influence as an actor in the industry, becomes more of a story that he is sharing, in which Gordon, as Gardner, becomes a subsidiary.

The film opens with a sarcastic monologue by Kumail (*The Big Sick*, 01:13-01:58). Through the monologue, Nanjiani's character prepares the audience to ingrain the idea that he is a non-traditional Hollywood lead who spent his childhood in Pakistan in an environment that is different than his current American life. The monologue acts as a narration to a footage of the everyday life in Pakistan that further testifies his claim and compares his life in both the countries as he smarmily declares,

I grew up in Pakistan. And people are always asking me, *what was that like?* Really not that different from here. I mean, we play cricket, which is just a spicier version of baseball. And we prayed a lot. Well, not a lot. Just five times a day. And we marry someone our parents find for us. Arranged marriage, you know?" (*The Big Sick*, 01:13-01:58)

This sarcastic approach also sets the tone for the film. This X vs Y comparison signifies a representation of the racial 'Other' that helps to define the basis for this romantic comedy by offering the anticipated opposition between here and there while ultimately hailing a White audience with a comfortable space to sanctimoniously celebrate their Americanness in comparison to the stubborn, inflexible Muslims with ancient ideologies.

The montage of everyday Pakistan with the monologue comes before the introduction of the characters of the film or the storyline. This suggests the importance of this tension between normative characterizations of American and Muslim South Asian cultures. The monologue essentially highlights the three things about Kumail's childhood in a country that often receives negative attention from American media for its cases of religious extremism and unstable politics. Even with the warm-toned, home movie-esque vibe in Kumail's presentation, Pakistan's way of practicing trivial, daily activities, in comparison to the American secular modernity, might come across as odd, exotic, and unconventional. However, Kumail's rendition of Pakistan

resembles a *National Geographic* documentary more than any typical Hollywood action movie<sup>8</sup> set to hunt down a top terrorist in a dismal, cataclysmic, shambolic, and overcrowded South Asian country. Most of such movies follow the White saviour trope, which, according to Matthew Hughey in his works, is,

so widespread that varied intercultural and interracial relations are often guided by logic that racializes and separates the people who are redeemers (whites) and the people who are redeemed or in need of redemption (nonwhites). Such imposing patronage enables an interpretation of nonwhite characters and cultures as essentially broken, marginalized, and pathological, while whites can emerge as messianic that easily fix the nonwhite pariah with their superior moral and mental abilities (2).

*The Big Sick*'s opening montage might not reaffirm Pakistan as a desolate place but does offer it as a source of ridicule for the stand-up set describing the place, and the people. The montage contains a rather stock-footage view of the busy streets of Pakistan: the men in their kurta-pajamas playing gully (alley) cricket, a woman in niqab (face-veil) walking with what appears to be books, the architecturally famous Faisal Mosque in Islamabad, and glittery couples in their vibrant and lavish wedding attires. The montage does not digress beyond the stereotypical assumptions and implied exoticisms around the everyday bits and pieces of Pakistan expected by a viewer unfamiliar with the country and its customs, which limits the lived experiences of the people in Pakistan in these specific boxes that are visibly different from what a stereotypical life in America might look like as inferred in Nanjiani's sarcastic narration. This depiction is not far

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<sup>8</sup> Clint Eastwood's *American Sniper* (2014) and Sam Hargrave's *Extraction* (2020) could be two of the examples of such movies.

from Jack Shaheen's research on the persistent negative and stereotypical projection of Muslims in mainstream Hollywood TV and film over the last 40 years (Kristian). It is important to identify how the first few minutes of the film also set an example of women in Pakistan: in niqab or in an extravagant, ethnic wedding attire. There is hardly anything else in between these two silhouettes of women of Pakistani origin in that setting. Both of these extreme choices of physical appearances foreshadow how the film is going to present Pakistani women: reduced to being almost invisible and little more than just a marriage-material.

The following exchange of dialogues further confirm the disparities between the Pakistani ideologies of the Nanjiani family and what Kumail has adopted as more of an American,

Sharmeen:     You know who I think should stand up is Malala<sup>9</sup>. She has something to say.

Kumail:        I know. She does open mic, and she crushes. A lot of ethnic material which I think is a crutch, and that one story gets a lot of play, but...

*(The Big Sick 14:21-14:34)*

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<sup>9</sup> Sharmeen identifies Malala Yousafzai as the sole Pakistani woman who would signify for mainstream audience as a "human" since she is identified as the "only" Muslim women to stand up to the Taliban, who represents education as a human right. This mention of Malala as a "model minority" figure, as Carlo Ceglia discusses in his blogpost, "Becoming Human: Malala Yousafzai and the Politics of Representation," that Kumail deflates as a bad comic stepping over her near death experience with a quip "that one story gets a lot of play," suggests and foreshadows the film's dismissive and ill-informed treatment of Muslim women.

This sardonic banter is a dinner table conversation that introduces the Nanjianis, a vibrant Pakistani immigrant family enjoying a meal together. The scene (*The Big Sick* 13:36-17:41) takes us to the lives of the Nanjianis in the suburbs of Chicago, where they enjoy their traditional food with the ladies of the family in their ethnic attires. The Nanjianis try to display their sense of humour (or sheer lack of it), which Kumail, their youngest son, an aspiring comedian, clearly disapproves of. The scene is a condensed one, with all the possible information one can pack in the mere five minutes the audience spends in the Nanjiani household. Besides introducing us to Kumail's family, the scene underpins the idea that the family operates as an obstacle to his happiness: it hints at his stiff relationship with them, where he cannot or does not share his true self with them at all. The scene also unpacks his family's apparent lack of boundaries when it comes to commenting on their relatives' lives and respecting others' privacies. The audience gets to know about Kumail's mother's repeated routine of trying to set him up with young, eligible Pakistani-origin women who he never seems to be interested in. The composition of the scene displays Kumail's discomfort in being a part of a family that he finds rather traditional, conservative, and backwards compared to his "own" acquired American values. The conversation comes across as incoherent, awkward, and disingenuous. The family seems to be learning about Kumail along with the audience, as if they had never spoken before this gathering. In these mere five minutes, the audience meets a family that is consumerist, sexist, condescending, ignorant, mean, disconnected and with a compromised sense of morality (e.g., Kumail's father claims to have hacked into his cousin's Facebook account) (*The Big Sick* 15:00-15:05). The family appears to be simultaneously and hypocritically staying close to the traditional beliefs that they tend to hold on to, further justifying Kumail's disapproval of them. In these mere five minutes, the audience is positioned to regenerate the pre-established beliefs about

an immigrant Muslim Pakistani family in America. In these mere five minutes, the audience are set to identify which character will have the most significant transformation in the story and who are probably going to come out as problematic and disposable. In these mere five minutes, the audience finds the “uh-oh” moment in this narrative and meets what in a romantic comedy would be called the “blocking character(s),” who throw obstacles in the way of the couple in love. Situating the Nanjiani family as the blocking character, even before the central romance blossoms, and the Gardner family is introduced, does more than just creating obstacles for the couple; it offers a justification so mainstream American audiences can connect to Kumail as an acceptable, assimilated male-lead, which is important to garner sympathy for the interracial couple and their journey.

Building on that, the next sections of this chapter focus on how *The Big Sick*, created by a team including Judd Apatow and Kumail Nanjiani, promises to offer a new take on the Hollywood romantic comedy, with an interracial relationship and a few jokes on 9/11, while still remaining a formulaic production to the sub-genre itself. The following sections look deep into how the couple’s story and the script are received as defying conventions when in fact it conforms to them. The warm reception of the film and much of its contents are also eerily analogous to the 1927 film, *The Jazz Singer*, as pointed out by *The New Yorker*’s Richard Brody, in his review of *The Big Sick*, which is discussed in the next section of the chapter, followed by a look into Judd Apatow’s romantic comedy formula, to understand how Hollywood recycles its tropes and trajectories when it comes to telling an immigrant narrative basted in the morale of the “American Dream” for a White American audience.

## 2.2 The Ghost of *The Jazz Singer* (1927)

*The Jazz Singer* (1927) was the first feature-length talkie produced in Hollywood. The film marks the beginning of a new era in Hollywood's history, but the contents of it might not be as grand. The film is about a blackface entertainer, Al Jolson, and how he escapes his immigrant Jewish identity to become more of an American; independent, successful, and desirable by White women. The gist of the movie is aptly presented by Michael Rogin, in his 1992 article, "The Jewish Jazz Singer,"

[*The Jazz Singer*] may have killed silent movies; within the film, however, he kills his father... Cantor Rabinowitz expects Jakie to become a cantor, like generations of Rabinowitzes before him. Jakie wants to sing jazz. Familially and musically, Cantor Jakie Rabinowitz would lose his own voice. Kol Nidre, the chant on the day of atonement for the forgiveness of sins, takes the place of Jakie's singing in the movie's opening scenes. But Jakie does not want to submerge his individual identity in ancient, sacred community; the result is family war. His father beats him for singing 'raggy time' songs. He throws the grown Jack Robin out of his house. Jazz was the emblem of generational revolt in the jazz age; critics charged it with destroying the family. Jakie's decision to become a jazz singer kills his father. The cultural guilt of the first talking picture arises from assimilation and parricide (422).

While *The Big Sick* does not involve a literal parricide, it does normalize the cultural rejection of the immigrant identity, through assimilation and acceptance of the one character who is ready to embrace the Americanness. It might even involve a horrifying nightmare of femicide given the way that narrative disposes of South Asian women, but this is the subject of a later chapter. For

now, I will only note that the Brown women in *The Big Sick*, ironically, bear the brunt of the film's criticism of the patriarchal Pakistan.

While Alan Crosland's creation had many reasons to be remembered positively for its historical importance, *The Jazz Singer* now mostly is scrutinized for Al Jolson's performance of "My Mammy" in blackface, along with the elements of assimilation at the cost of one's familial ties. *The Big Sick* might not seem to be as wildly controversial in its content compared to *The Jazz Singer*, as stand-up comedy is not equated with degeneracy in the same way jazz was in the early twentieth century, but both the films share resonating elements. Both the stories are about men with a passion that is not entirely welcomed by the communities they were born into. Both the stories are about men who are immigrants to America in a time when the immigration laws are difficult towards the people of their specific communities. Both the stories are about men who defy their families' wishes to go after their dreams: their American dreams. Both the stories are about men who, in their ardent endeavour to achieve what they think they were meant and deserve to be, overlook the fact that they are somehow hurting and misrepresenting the communities which they come from. Jolson's character adds a dimension to the fact that both African American and Jewish communities are denigrated in early twentieth century America. In this time, becoming American and less Jewish means playing a White man who mimics a Black man. For Nanjiani, there is a parallel in terms of how racial mimicry works in a contemporary setting. The fact that Nanjiani and others or Jolson are granted this space and position to gain privilege via a rejection of identity, is much more complicated than the opportunity itself.

Despite being 90 years apart in their releases, both *The Jazz Singer* and *The Big Sick* try to remind their audience of what the "American Dream" is expected to look like for an immigrant. Both the films are about the wild, open, and free American scene of the arts and



culture, where it is always cheerful and easy for the performers to come and share the best of their talents with an equally cultured audience. In *The Jazz Singer*, it is the opening scene in a jubilant bar where Al Jolson bursts into a song, and quite literally breaks the silence of the silent movie era. In *The Big Sick*, the stage for performance is a comedy club and Kumail Nanjiani is trying to make his mark as an immigrant Muslim comedian, whose career choice is clearly not approved by his family, and who is also struggling in between his Muslim and American identities, which apparently cannot co-exist, in a political environment where the people from his community are largely positioned as anti-Americans. Both films reconfirm the cultural superiority of the American values, where anyone who shares and/or learns those values, can follow their artistic dreams, and achieve success beyond their imagination in the “Land of Opportunities.” The transition from jazz to stand-up comedy might show the 90 years and several wars that had passed between the two films, but the normative cultural script that celebrates assimilation into dominant White hegemonic culture of the narratives somehow remains the same for the protagonists. In order to be a successful American, they are to fight against their roots, where their Americanness always wins. The stories of the immigrant “Others” like Kumail and Al are presentable as they follow what the American “Self” inflicts. Having established *The Big Sick* as a trope working within a well-worn assimilationist cultural script, the chapter now considers genre contribution to that cultural script.

### **2.3 *The Big Sick* as a Romantic Comedy**

Though the film itself was praised by many critics and reviewers (*The New York Times*, *Washington Post* etc.) as a fresh take on the trope of a quintessential Hollywood romantic

comedy, it does not essentially deviate from a Shakespearean comedy. A classic Shakespearean comedy, as described by Freidman and his co-authors, in their book, *An Introduction to Film Genres* (2013), revolves around how, “young people meet and fall in love, but numerous, often funny, complications ensue: humorous misunderstandings, mistaken identities, infatuations with wrong people, and parental/official disapproval” (121). *The Big Sick*, at its core, is not quite different from that, except for the interracial couple at its centre in a genre that has always reflected predominantly White, able-bodied, attractive, financially privileged, heterosexual couples. Film and media industries across the world, especially in South Asia, have also long been following the formula as a classic approach that focuses on pre-marital courtship of a physically attractive couple, their obstacles in the process and an eventual “happy ending” with a marriage ceremony, that is assumed to solve all the hardships the couple has endured with the promise of a pristine, uncomplicated future.

*The Big Sick* is categorized as an American romantic comedy. The sub-genre of romantic comedies, or romcoms as mentioned in the book *An Introduction to Film Genres*, “has remained extraordinarily constant over the centuries. Although contemporary filmmakers struggle to differentiate their works in myriad ways, their efforts normally amount to surface variation over a consistent ‘marriage plot’<sup>10</sup>: 1) meet, 2) separate, 3) unite; or, in the ‘remarriage’ variation, 1) be married, 2) separate, 3) remarry” (Freidman et al. 122). *The Big Sick* does not fall too far from that trajectory. The film opens in a comedy club in Chicago where Kumail Nanjiani is an

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<sup>10</sup> This pattern originates in medieval Arabic and Persian romance which influenced Europe and Bollywood. One of the early examples of this pattern comes from Nezami Ganjawi (1140-1209 CE) and his timeless Persian romance of *Laili and Majnun* (Ahmadi).

aspiring stand-up comedian sharing his dream of becoming an established name in the industry with his buddies who also perform their sets in the same club. Nanjiani portrays a mildly nervous version of himself, who is also the only person of colour in the group of budding comedians performing in that club. American actor and stand-up comedian, Bo Burnham plays the “Alpha White Male” CJ, who is an ambitious, zealously confident comedian in Kumail’s circle, and is usually the first one to bag the bigger opportunities through his performances. *Saturday Night Live*’s cast member, Aidy Bryant plays Mary, a female comic who has a set that comments on her body and teenage-self through an easel-and-poster bit. The third frequent member in the group, and the unofficial “loser” in this narrative, is the character of Chris, played by Kurt Braunohler, who is also Kumail’s roommate.

The comedy club is also where Kumail is heckled by Emily Gardner (Zoe Kazan) during his set, where he later confronts her about the fact that her “woo-hoo” had distracted him. This resembles a typical “meet-cute,” which film studies academic Claire Mortimer puts as, “one of the defining moments of romcom, when the couple first encounter each other, generally in comic and prophetic circumstances. The meet-cute is prophetic in that it can often suggest the nature of the couple’s relationship” (Mortimer 5-6). After a quick exchange of words, Kumail writes Emily’s name down in Urdu on a piece of bar napkin, which later is revealed to be Kumail’s move of wooing White women, who might fall for his exotic appeal. Later that night, the couple head back to Kumail’s apartment, and spend the night together, where Emily later discovers that he is also an Uber driver. This pre-marital sex scene sets up the subsequent awkward family dinner scene discussed earlier in the chapter and establishes that Kumail cannot reveal Emily to his often boorish, awkward family who seem to disapprove of mixed-race marriages.

From there, the casual relationship between Emily and Kumail starts to warm up, and the audience gets to experience their sweet romantic moments expected in a quintessential romantic comedy. It takes only a couple more scenes for Emily to find out that Kumail might not be available to meet her parents, while Kumail decides to share the information that he is dating a “White” woman with his brother. The couple also keeps learning how different their upbringings have been, and it soon leads to the central tension of the plot, or to the second curve in the trope of romcoms, the “separation.” *The Big Sick* is unique in its own way: the separation here unfolds in two parts in the movie. The first part occurs when a rather sickly Emily, with what appears to be a hard-to-get-rid-of cold and an unusual ankle pain, finds out that Kumail has a cigar box full of photos and information of young Pakistani women, which makes her inquire if he is judging, “Pakistan’s next top model or something?” (*The Big Sick* 33:19-33:24). In response to her evocative comment, Kumail tries to explain how his culture has arranged marriages and how his mother would very much like for him to settle down with an immigrant, eligible, Muslim woman of Pakistani origins. Kumail, however, does not explain why he has been keeping the photos of the women he had already rejected in a potential arranged marriage. The revelation of the matchbox is also the moment when Emily learns that Kumail has not discussed their relationship with his parents at all, which leads her to pose one of the most critical questions in the plot, “Can you imagine a world in which we end up together?” Kumail appears eerily awkward, and unprepared for this question and says, “I don’t know,” which makes Emily even more upset (*The Big Sick* 35:55-36:04). She immediately dashes out of his apartment repeating that she had been unsuccessful in identifying all the “red flags” that had been right in front of her eyes in terms of this relationship from the get-go (*The Big Sick* 32:44-36:16).

While the “separation” phase of this romantic comedy starts with this act, it does not reach the second and more critical part of the process before the next significant moment on screen. Before that, the audience gets a sense that the couple has been on a serious break for a while, where Kumail keeps on showing up at his parents’ house for what appears to be a weekly dinner with an eligible Pakistani woman always randomly “dropping by.” Kumail even finds another woman at the comedy club to try his “writing her name in Urdu” move. The story is told from Kumail’s perspective, so the audience does not get to know how Emily has dealt with the breakup. The night he sleeps with another White woman that he had just met at the bar coincides with a call in the middle of the night from one of Emily’s friends in which he learns that Emily has been admitted to the hospital and needs assistance. Kumail shows up at the hospital emergency room almost immediately, where a very unwell Emily is surprised to see him but tells him that she is absolutely fine and that he should not be there. He insists on staying over when the doctors come to check on her. Later that night, Kumail is approached by one of the doctors, asking if he is her husband, as they need someone to sign a waiver to put Emily in a medically induced coma. A perplexed Kumail signs the documents and calls Emily’s parents from her phone, using her comatose finger to unlock the device as she remains unconscious. This is the “moment of crisis” for *The Big Sick*, which is, what Mortimer calls a romantic comedy’s “very distinctive narrative structure.” Mortimer further explains the trajectory, “boy meets girl, various obstacles prevent them from being together, coincidences and complications ensue, ultimately leading to the couple’s realisation that they were meant to be together” (4). Only in this case, Mortimer’s trajectory resulting in the couple’s realization is frustrated by the fact that Emily is in a coma, and right before the coma, she was heartbroken and had no trust in Kumail. Kumail’s awkward realisation occurs first, and then he decides to keep acting on it, while Emily still has

no agency in all this. In the case of *The Big Sick*, this situation generates a bit of a creepy stalker vibe for Kumail's character who is a deeply conflicted man caught between his own family and Emily's as someone who keeps a matchbox of pictures of young Pakistani women in his bedroom. It is not clear if he is truly in love with a woman in coma or if he is just drawn to the idea of chivalry that comes with winning her parents over despite their repeated requests to leave them alone.

While for *The Big Sick*, the beginning of the central tension happens with the big fight and the breakup scene between Kumail and Emily, the bigger concern and the root of all troubles remain within the glaring differences between the upbringing of the two, with a completely dissimilar set of ideologies that their own families' practice. Hence, the introduction of Emily's parents in the narrative, while the audience has already had an idea of how the Nanjianis are, becomes critical to the plot, surpassing Emily's serious and unresolved medical condition. Mortimer, too, identifies the tensions surrounding families for the two characters in "love" as one of the key features of modern romcoms, "Family can [also] be problematic, providing complications and opposition to the relationship" (8). As the story progresses towards its second and final half, the fundamental differences between the two families, and their relationships with each other, as parents, as partners and as human beings in general becomes more apparent to the audience. The two families never share screen time together, even though in the extra diegetic snapshots of the two real weddings that are stitched into the closing credit sequence hint of a happier consolidation of the families in reality. *The Big Sick* becomes a story of how Kumail wins over Emily's parents from this point onwards, as Emily remains unresponsive for the most of it (quite literally). Furthermore, Kumail's parents are presented as the secondary set of parents in the narrative, who are here to instrumentalize the central tension of the plot surpassing Emily's

coma. The story thus becomes more about how a Brown, Muslim immigrant wins over a White couple with distinct American values and how that middle-class White American couple warms up to him, realizing that Kumail is not essentially much different from them. While the story allocates the growth and transformation of the Gardners', it does not accommodate the Nanjianis' who remain stubborn obstacles in the narrative.

Emily's mother, Beth Gardner, a North Carolina native, hails from an army family, while Terry Gardner, is from New York, but is a college professor in North Carolina, where they had met and fallen in love. Kumail learns all the information in one of the first true, sincere conversations he and Beth get to have after a few drinks and a heckling incident in his comedy club, where he was accompanied by the Gardners. However, Kumail is supposed to be at one of the usual dinners at his parents' that night, where they are waiting with another young eligible Pakistani woman his mother had found for him. Kumail's parents have no idea where he is as he continues to ignore their calls throughout the night, while he warms up to Emily's parents; first Beth and then Terry.

Romantic comedy is certainly a sub-genre that adjusts itself according to the palate of its audience. As Mortimer puts it, "One way in which some romantic comedies seek to satisfy their audience is in providing new templates for family structures and relationships" (18). She also mentions how this genre seems to have saved itself from an often-predicted extinction. She further explains, "In line with the rest of Hollywood output, there has been some effort to recognize the global nature of today's audiences, with actors from ethnic minorities being cast in central roles" (18). The interracial relationship has been the unique selling point for *The Big Sick*, with Nanjiani's starring role as a revolutionary moment for the Hollywood romantic comedies and their history of casting mostly White, able-bodied leads.

Nanjiani's starring role in a Judd Apatow production also bears significance. Apatow, often called an auteur, has been admired for shifting the focus from "chick flicks" to the story of the "underdog male," who, according to Mortimer, manages to, "achieve credibility through partnership with beauty" (66). Apatow's creative vision focuses on a male audience, with representations of male leads, who are not quite the Prince Charming type. Apatow's male lead's lack of well-established heroic charm is how he becomes more appealing, and also how he ends up getting his ladylove, who is often, almost essentially someone out of his league. Apatow's cinematic journey has been about the flawed hero, and *The Big Sick* fits perfectly under that umbrella. While his movies have successfully attracted a new set of male audience for the contemporary romantic comedies, his works have often received criticism for not having a gender balance present in the narrative. The common trope in Apatow projects have become stories that endorse, as Mortimer explains, "the underdog, the underachieving male, suggesting that such a type has important characteristics that the successful woman needs in order to attain happiness" (68). The added twist for *The Big Sick* is that the underdog, underachieving male lead, especially by his family's standards, is not only a Brown immigrant, but also a Muslim protagonist, and he is probably not as much of a slacker as Seth Rogen's character Ben was in the Apatow-classic *Knocked Up* (2007), but is very much in the territory with his frequent lies, ordinary background, lack of self-confidence, and group of like-minded friends who get his "goofiness" (Kumail's friends are aspiring comedians!). Kumail snugly fits in the Apatow formula.

Emily's character is also not too far from Alison's in *Knocked Up*, played by Katherine Heigl. Heigl, while speaking about her role in this film, critiqued how such a work "paints the women as shrews, as humourless and uptight, and it paints the men as lovable, goofy, fun-loving



guys. It was hard for [Heigl] to love the movie,” that had arguably “ruined” her career (“Katherine”). Apatow’s productions seem to have a pattern of presenting women in a certain light of humiliation and/or passivity to stay true to the “bro-code.” Heigl ended up apologizing for her remarks as an unsuccessful damage-control, thanks to the towering popularity of Apatow and his niche at the time. There is a certain change in portraying the relationship between the central couple that is noticeable in the two films, *Knocked Up* (2007) and *The Big Sick* (2017) released 10 years apart. Emily and Kumail in *The Big Sick* seem to have similar agencies, compared to what was mostly a train-wreck romance between Alison and Ben in *Knocked Up*; both the couples end up in a situation that bounds them to be together, and ultimately makes the previously uptight woman realize the underlying potential of someone they initially had decided to stay away from. However, at the end of it all, the women settle down for these unaccountable, often unreliable, confused men, giving their newly developed, but questionable sincerity a chance and then they (apparently) live happily ever after. In *The Big Sick*, Emily’s character rarely gets that chance to justify what made her to reconsider Kumail even though his affection (or compassion) grew for her when she was unconscious and morbidly ill. She seems to have come to appreciate the idea that Kumail was there when she was unwell and unconscious, though technically they were broken up when she was in coma. Her sense of reliability towards Kumail’s sincerity comes from secondary sources: her parents, and a video of his performance addressing her illness that she watches afterwards. She seems to have forgiven the reason(s) that had separated them: Kumail’s inability to answer her question about a possible future together, and also his dishonesty towards her and his family. She warms up to the idea that Kumail will be “loyal” to her, from the impression he had made on her parents during her coma days. However, both *Knocked Up* and *The Big Sick* remain

[t]rue to the romantic comedy formula in having the central couple learn from each other, their relationship progressing through the challenges posed by their different characters and attitudes. Much of the essential comedy of the narrative is on the seemingly irreconcilable differences between the two, both physically and in terms of their lifestyles (Mortimer 66).

In *The Big Sick*, the challenging and thus learning point is the cultural differences between the two central characters and their upbringings. The couple reaches a point where they identify the irreconcilable differences, when Emily learns about Kumail's dishonesty towards her and his family, right before her coma. Emily does reconcile with Kumail in the latter half of the film after she returns from her coma, to, essentially, make the romcom work. Emily's decision seems to be informed by her sense of gratitude towards Kumail, her parents, especially her mother's changed view of him, and his desperate attempts to pursue her. The irreconcilable differences that had triggered their separation are never discussed at length again, in attempts for a reconciliation, and the solution comes from Kumail denouncing his family and burning the photos of the women who his mother considered for him. Nevertheless, in *The Big Sick*, the cultural dissonance that imagines resistant South Asian families persists. The audience gets a sense that the romance will work out fine by the end, as the credits show the real wedding pictures, but the process of uniting the families to reach that "happy ending" is avoided. The coming around of Kumail's parents, especially after his mother's strong opposition, loses priority beyond functioning as a blocking factor needed for the central tension in the romantic comedy to grow and solidify. The Nanjiani family and their arc of the story continue to remain disposable in the narrative of *The Big Sick*.

## 2.4 A Media Darling

*The Big Sick* was initially a limited-release independent production, which premiered in the 2017 Sundance Film Festival<sup>11</sup> on January 20 and was picked up by Amazon Studios 2 days after the release, on January 22, 2017. The US\$12 million distribution deal, *Deadline* reports, was one of the highest of that year's festival, and resonated with Amazon Studios' deal the previous year, where it had picked up *Manchester by the Sea* (2016) from Sundance, which ended up being an Oscar frontrunner. Amazon Studios won the bidding war for *The Big Sick*'s North American distribution rights, including some major European markets, which was between other industry giants, Sony Pictures Worldwide Acquisitions, and Fox Searchlight (Fleming). Since its premiere, *The Big Sick* was a festival favourite and was considered to be an Oscar-worthy investment for the production companies involved, which later proved to be true with the plethora of nominations the film garnered by the following award season. It is important to highlight the conversations the film generated during its promotional days, to unpack the film's attempt to position its audience, to be successful as a fresh take on romantic comedy, with the story of a real-life interracial relationship in the focus, something rather unusual in Hollywood, while still being very much true to the trope of the sub-genre and Apatow's brand.

The film's promotional activities started in the summer of 2017, closer to its theatrical release date. While the entire or most of the cast had interviews and appearances in the media around the Sundance premiere, prior to the summer theatre release, Kumail Nanjiani became the

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<sup>11</sup> An annual film festival renowned for hosting independent films in Utah, USA, organized by the Sundance Institute.

one to appear in most of the talk shows. He also became the first Pakistani American ever to host NBC's historic variety show, *Saturday Night Live* on October 24, 2017, which, given the show's selective nature of scheduling hosts, validated the growing popularity of Nanjiani and what *The Big Sick* stands for. In his opening monologue, Nanjiani touches on several sensitive issues, including Islamophobia, racism, and the fact that his wife is a "White American person" ("Kumail Nanjiani Standup Monologue- SNL" 1:04-1:09). He also jokingly mentions how his family's plan to never let any Nanjiani men marry a White woman ever again after his uncle had done that 40 years ago, got foiled with Kumail getting married to Emily. He jokes how he made the movie about their love story, "just to rub it to their faces. Nanjiani: 0, White Women: 2" ("Kumail Nanjiani Standup Monologue- SNL" 1:45-1:57). He continues his stand-up monologue with how his movie was mostly well-received and how many people have commented that they do not like the interracial love as a feature of the narrative. He wishes he could prove the group of people who are racist to him that taking care of others is the way of his people ("Kumail Nanjiani Standup Monologue- SNL" 2:20-3:58). This quip is an attempt at outlining the reversal of the White saviour fantasy, which primarily lives outside the narrative of *The Big Sick*. He then goes on with his set of jokes on how Islamophobia is revived at that point of time, like the queer sitcom *Will and Grace*<sup>12</sup> (1998-2005; 2017-2020), "which was big a while ago [...] and now is back and bigger than ever!" ("Kumail Nanjiani Standup Monologue- SNL" 4:00-4:20). He ends his monologue with tips on how to be a better racist, and he stands by his claim that "an

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<sup>12</sup> *Will and Grace* was one of the first popular American sitcoms to have featured a gay lead character. The show was rebooted with most of the original cast in 2017 and ended in 2020 with a much lower popularity rate compared to the show's original run (IMDb.com).

informed racist is a better racist” (“Kumail Nanjiani Standup Monologue- SNL” 7:16-7:20).

Nanjiani hosting the SNL is a momentous event for both the film’s promotions and his personal career growth as a stand-up comic as well as the culmination of a dream cached within the film itself in the dinner table scene when his family comments that he should be on *SNL*. Kumail Nanjiani’s personality as the funny Brown guy who does not challenge his White audience to think about their privilege brings back the question of who the joke is for, and who is to find it funny.

*The Big Sick* gave Kumail Nanjiani more exposure than anything else that he had done before and had set his career to the path that landed him a role in Marvel’s upcoming *The Eternals* (2021) as well as other projects, including the most recent *Men in Black* franchise, *Men in Black: International* (2019) where he is the voice of a tiny alien named “Pawny,” which somehow sets him beyond his comedian image in Hollywood. During his appearance on *Jimmy Kimmel Live* on September 19, 2017, he mentions that he was obsessed with the “bad reviews” his film had received, and how he was not particularly happy with the review that *The New Yorker* published about *The Big Sick* (“Kumail Nanjiani Obsessed with Bad Reviews”), by Richard Brody, that has been mentioned in the previous chapter. In his appearance on *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert* on June 20, 2017, he emphasizes that the film is still a comedy, even though its premise may sound like “not a comedy” (“Kumail Nanjiani Bonded with His Wife’s

Parents During Her Coma” 0:02-7:28). As aforementioned, he became the only face to promote the film, while the comparatively well-known cast remains largely excluded<sup>13</sup>.

The focus on Nanjiani, his background and his story with his wife became the central theme for the promotional package of the movie. His *SNL* and other media appearances mark Kumail Nanjiani’s arrival and acceptance in the mainstream American culture, while also asserting how his stand-up humour like in *The Big Sick* fits into an assimilation path within the American dream arc where even Brown men can be loved. His ridiculing of racism tends to offer a free pass to mainstream viewers in their comfort zone, to laugh out and feel progressive. In the meantime, the “biggest star” of the film, as hinted by Nanjiani himself in the previously mentioned Colbert interview, Anupam Kher, never gets to be interviewed as a star in the American media. Zoe Kazan’s Emily in *The Big Sick* is largely absent in the major moments of the story; her comatose state keeps her distant, passive, and clueless in her own story, and lets Kumail’s perspective to be the only one for the audience to experience. The promotional activities set the tone the reviews and acclamation the movie received from the media outlets as well. *The Big Sick* had been a media favourite when it was being promoted, and around the award season that year<sup>14</sup>.

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<sup>13</sup> Kazan’s solo appearance on *The Last Show* is the exceptions to a concerted effort at highlighting Nanjiani and his story, a narrative that is even present in her appearance and Colbert’s line of questions. (“Zoe Kazan Fell Asleep on Set While Playing A Coma Patient” 00:56-7:11).

<sup>14</sup> *The Big Sick*, as the *LA Times* reports, “received 15 major nominations in 2018, winning 3 awards,” including the 2018 Critic’s Choice Award for “Best Comedy” and an Academy Awards nomination for “Best Original Screenplay” (latimes.com).

While the media tour and the promotions play a key role in shaping the audience of today, it simply is not the only factor in the play. There are codes and conventions that have been learned through decades of films interested in mediating culture and how some move beyond their ethnic commitment and its norms. While *The Big Sick* might appear to be innovative, and was certainly promoted as such, it is actually surprisingly conventional, as discussed in this chapter.

Through a closer look at the many threads of its production and promotion, this chapter describes and analyses how *The Big Sick*, even with the praise it received for being a “fresh” narrative, follows an old Hollywood formula of a prescribed “American Dream” that is embedded in the comforts of White gaze and the conditions of assimilation. While most of the admirers of *The Big Sick*, as discussed in the third chapter, are focused on the inclusion of underrepresented communities, the film conforms to the conventions of the recycled tropes endorsing assimilation. This discussion is important to set the next chapter, which examines elements of the plot that are on the margins of the romcom narrative but speak to the racial self-loathing established through the parallels between Jolson and Nanjiani.

## **Brown Eyes, White Gaze and the Saviour Complexes in *The Big Sick***

Following the thread of the first chapter, this chapter of the thesis considers three subservient scenes to the romantic comedy narrative arc discussed in chapter one from the film, to examine the complexities of South Asian experiences in America, as told by *The Big Sick*. In an attempt to do so, this chapter studies the structures and solutions presented and followed in the film as ways of navigating the immigrant experiences, while also looking into the identity crises, self-consciousness, and saviour complexes the South Asian characters in *The Big Sick* are subject to.

### **3.1 The One-man Show**

The first scene is the one where Kumail performs a one-man show about Pakistan in the film that appears in fleeting glimpses throughout *The Big Sick*'s narrative arc. This scene is the first time Emily experiences the show, and at the end of it, she comes to see Kumail backstage, which leads to the following conversation:

Emily:            I really liked it. I learned a lot about Pakistan. And cricket and all those positions.

                      But I just wished I had learned more about you. Does that make any sense?

Kumail:          Yeah!

(*The Big Sick* 24:16 - 24:26)

Emily expresses her interest in learning more about him, as a person, instead of the abundance of trivial information that the show offers about Pakistan. The show, in which Kumail, who left Pakistan in his early teen years when his family migrated to America, appears to be an attempt



for him to share his knowledge of the South Asian country with the people of Chicago, where he lives now. While this gesture might come across as his way of paying homage to his roots in a post-9/11 context, it is rather contrary to how Kumail talks about his culture and his personal struggles in adjusting with it. There is a certain disparity between his positionality with Pakistani culture and how he projects that culture, to a group of people who may or may not be aware of Pakistan. Since it is also one of the few scenes where South Asian culture, and/or Pakistan, more specifically, is addressed from Kumail's perspective, the one-man show becomes an important opportunity to read how South Asian representation operates in this film.

Kumail's one-man show opens in a dimly lit theatre in Chicago, where he is sitting in a set designed to look like his childhood bedroom in Pakistan. The metal-framed twin bed has a prayer mat laid on top of it, to emphasize the Nanjiani family's diligence in observing the Muslim five-times-a-day prayer schedule. According to his biography, Kumail Nanjiani was raised as a Shia/Shiite Muslim, but this identity is subsumed into a larger generalizing Muslim identity<sup>15</sup>. The presence of the prayer mat also connects back to the film's opening monologue on Pakistan by Kumail, where he mentions how Pakistanis pray five times a day (*The Big Sick* 01:35). The set for the room also includes a poster of *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* (1990), which can also be tied back to the opening monologue, to show Kumail's fascination with and devotion to American popular culture. According to the opening monologue again, Pakistan, when Kumail was still living there, aired only one episode of the American actor David Hasselhoff's *Knight Rider* (1982-1986), but it definitely offered preteens access to popular

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<sup>15</sup> The film never addresses Nanjiani's Muslim practices, which might indicate towards an assumption that the mainstream Americans do not know (nor care about) the differences between Shia/ Shiite and Sunni Muslims.

movies like *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*. It seems plausible to find that Kumail grew up to like *The X-Files* (1993-2002; 2016), another American TV classic of the 90's, while also being a fan of Vincent Price<sup>16</sup> movies. Kumail, even in Pakistan, had the access and appetite for American popular culture, and was living a life attributed towards the nerdy whiteness. His bedside table on the set has a mini-Statue of Liberty, confirming the "American Dream" he was pursuing even as a 12-year-old; the resonance of which is noticeable in his present self. In his dialogues during the one-man show, he sets up the scenario even further. He asks if the audience can smell his mother's "murgh rogan josh," a Mughlai delicacy made with chicken, popular in South Asian Muslim cuisine. He asks if the audience can hear his father watching cricket on the telly. He then asks if the audience can feel the weight of Pakistan's history (*The Big Sick* 22:18-22:23). With such a phrasing, Kumail represents the gravitas of the history and its importance to Pakistan, to his current audience, and more importantly, to him, as an immigrant with fading connection to a country, its culture, and customs, available to him in the form of memories of a past he remembers or has chosen to remember, mostly in terms of the current cultural context he is in. He remembers things about Pakistan that are closer to his life in America. Considering this, one could almost ask, if Nanjiani ever was a Pakistani if this is how he grew up, or if there is something exclusively left with the widespread Americanization of international media and entertainment industries. His experiences as a young Pakistani point towards the national and cultural distinctions in an age of American cultural hegemony globally, especially in the 80's.

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<sup>16</sup> Actor Vincent Price has occasionally been called the "Father of Horror Films" in Hollywood. His theatrical voice, facial expressions and overall persona made him popular among queer audience and made his movies a Halloween viewing staple (vincentprice.com).

The show continues with Kumail describing how cricket, the most popular sport in Pakistan is played. Cricket was introduced to the South Asians by their British colonizers. Kumail also does a PowerPoint-style presentation on how India is Pakistan's biggest rival, without diving into the complex, shared history of colonization and the everlasting aftereffects of that experience between the two neighbouring countries. He instead continues with how Pakistan's largest imports are cotton and concrete. The closing scene of the one-man show includes a taste of the biggest celebration in Pakistan, Eid, which is an Islamic celebration, and Kumail compares it aptly with Christmas. He then asks Chris, his roommate, who is also dressed in a kurta like Kumail, to serve mithai, a traditional sweet dish, which Kumail describes is made with sugar, condensed milk, and love, "[o]r at least that was my mom's recipe" (*The Big Sick* 23:16). This reflection unwittingly echoes Jolson's "Mammy" in *The Jazz Singer* (1927): loving the maternal culture on one level as food and comfort yet reducing Pakistan to just facts and numbers. CJ comments that Chris looks like, "a children's toy from Malaysia" (*The Big Sick* 23:20), to emphasize how all Muslim identities appear to be interchangeable for a White American audience regardless the geographic location and distinctive culture.

Chris plays the role of Kumail's "khansamah," an imperial era butler or servant of the South Asian aristocratic household. This little detail is interesting, as Kumail, the Brown Muslim man has his White roommate serve as khansamah for his one-man show. It attempts to flip the script on Kumail's part, as the role reversal shows how being in America allows Kumail to order around Chris, since he, the Brown Muslim man, holds the authority in this post-9/11 context, in his own show. On the contrary, CJ, the other White male friend in the group, cannot seem to digest this idea, which is reflected in his derogatory comments towards Chris' involvement in this play. While this detail might be read as an apparent power reversal in a racial equity stance

for Hollywood and Muslim characters, who can have the agency to have a White person play not only his friends but also his khansamah, CJ's ridicule brings viewers back to the reality that such an instance is only possible with the likes of Chris—an incompetent, buffoon of a character with no set future in the horizon. CJ, through his constant “friendly” banter, shows his discomfort in these anomalies: Chris's performance, and the one-man show itself, and perhaps, even, the relationship between Kumail and Emily. CJ's indirect apprehension can also be sensed in the scene prior to the one-man show, where he had jokingly mentioned the one-man show (*The Big Sick* 21:07-21:55) to put Kumail in the spotlight in front of Emily.

CJ's sneering behaviour in the film is not designed to be taken seriously, as he is a confident comedian, and he does help Kumail out in the end. CJ has the lock on the Montreal Comedy Festival gig in the early moments of the film, which represents the trajectory that Kumail yearns for. CJ embodies the American Dream for comics. While his display of discomfort and constant bickering with his friends might require its own analysis at a different occasion, it offers a glimpse of the threat he tries to avoid at times, by being unequivocally critical of people he dislikes. CJ thus becomes a reflection of “an ordinary/normal subject” and/or a “pure body,” as described by Sara Ahmed in her 2004 essay, “Affective Economics,” who finds that so-called other bodies exist only as transgressions of the purity of the White race. While CJ might not display any obvious, extreme racist traits, his character does come across as the more relatable American representation, who is an able-bodied White male with agency, voice, confidence, and a persona that Kumail or other male characters lack. CJ is the embodiment of the contemporary White American audience, who is tolerant enough to have friends of colour, but does not back off when it comes to speak his mind and assert his privilege and dominance. Instead of contradicting CJ's disapproval of the show's shortcomings, Kumail

and his monotonous statistical presentation on Pakistan justifies his friends' ridicules. The audience is put in a position to agree with CJ: the show is not good, and CJ is right to ridicule it. However, the audience is not prompted to question why would Kumail choose the most trivial details to share about Pakistan in this setting, and/or the purpose of a show like this, because the scene is set as a rather forgettable one. CJ's impression of the one-man show becomes valid, especially when Emily also rephrases his words in her own way: "I wish I knew more about you!"

Emily's words thus become important to scrutinize when it comes to how *The Big Sick* handles its South Asian representation, and more particularly, the Pakistani side of the storyline. Emily and the audience are put into a position to question, what is it that they are to learn and like about Pakistan: it appears boring, backwards and with the lack of an authentic culture. The dishes the country boasts of comes from the Mughals, the game the people follow comes from the British, the religion they practice is shared with billions of other Muslims, and the TV shows they watch are cheesy American reruns. While it could be argued that Pakistan, at least how Kumail presents the country, appears to have a well-constructed cosmopolitan culture in itself then, but sadly, that is not the impression the one-man show leaves. The performance and eventually the film itself display instances when the representation of the South Asian elements—which is depicted in a larger canvas here compared to any other contemporary productions in Hollywood, comes across as a rather stereotypical and problematic one, in need of a closer look. Sara Ahmed, in her book *The Promise of Happiness* (2010) offers a way to look at such instances, as she analyzes *Bend it Like Beckham*, a 2002 British film about an immigrant Indian girl's dreams to play soccer in England. Ahmed observes,

Although the film seems to embody the idea of ‘the culture clash,’ where the migrant is caught between two cultures, it does not simply represent the two cultures as “cultures” in quite the same way. If anything, the migrant culture appears as culture, as something given or possessed, through being contrasted with the individualism of the West, where you are free to do and to be ‘whoever’ you want to be, understood as the freedom to be happy (134).

It is important to look at how Kumail’s one-man show about his country of origin is presented in the film, to understand the purpose of the scene in this film, and what is it doing in representing Pakistan a.k.a. the “Other” culture, in this play-within-a-play moment. The one-man show appears to be an act of pushing the envelope of his racially minor, immigrant identity on Kumail’s end, which he could also consider as service on behalf of Pakistani-Muslim communities in a post-9/11 America. While it can be debated if the play-within-a-play would have made a stronger impact if it was introduced in a positive manner by his White friends, but like many other elements of this film, this “Pakistan 101” scene is designed to provoke a sense of ridicule and dismissal, and the monotonous performance helps to establish this framework.

The show seems to have quite an audience besides Kumail’s friends, and now Emily and her unnamed Brown female friend<sup>17</sup>, who we had last seen with Emily in the scene where she

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<sup>17</sup> While it is not very important to discuss Emily’s one unnamed visibly Brown female friend in this chapter, but her existence only in the scenes where Emily first meets Kumail and then tries to learn about his background is important, and will be discussed broadly in the next chapter, which looks at how the female characters of colour are portrayed in the film, and also beyond it: when it comes to the reception of the film as well. However, it is important

initially “woo-hoo-ed” Kumail (*The Big Sick* 6:00-6:45). The friend says to Emily that she cannot stay after the show, and we do not see her after this scene (*The Big Sick* 22:40). While it is not important for the plot, but her exit could indicate the doubled path of respect and dismissal in making sense of this scene. The one-man show comes across as a way a White spectator might see this as Kumail’s quiet attempt to dispel Islamophobia in post-9/11 America one-audience-at-a-time. By inviting the small gathering of people, including his White friends, to the memories of his childhood, he shows this intimate version of Pakistan aimed at humanizing the foreign space for xenophobic Americans. With that said, how many xenophobic Americans are going to attend one-man shows in small Chicago theatres about Pakistan anyways? It ultimately comes across as the unnecessary push for the audience to show how mundane and outdated life and interests in Pakistan can be, compared to the vibrant Americanness that Kumail pursues. The one-man show goes on to diminish the lives of Pakistanis and/or the communities of colour in this context, remarkable only for its status as the “Other” culture.

CJ makes a joke at the end of the show that all this production does is to remind everyone that Kumail is, indeed, from Pakistan. The peculiarity of the one-man show cannot only be experienced through CJ’s opposition towards it, but also as an exercise in asymmetric relativism, a unidirectional flow to the cultural understanding that assumes that Pakistan needs to be explained to Americans, but America does not need to be explained to Pakistan, thanks to the widespread presence of its culture even in Kumail’s childhood bedroom. America’s cultural landscape is the one true and known by all, as we might have seen in numerous Hollywood

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to note that she leaves rather early and does not have any direct conversations with Kumail in the limited screen time she is granted.

films. The show also avoids the contents, including the Islamic practices, arranged marriage etc., that Kumail tries to run away from in his day-to-day life. His intention might be to offer working knowledge of Pakistan to his friends who might be oblivious of his culture. However, considering the way it is presented and the responses from his friends, it does not seem to achieve that lofty goal.

Kumail, the character, in this particular theatrical performance, appears to be the one who is still learning about Pakistan more than anybody else in the room. It might seem weird that he is considering the most arbitrary, uninteresting, and irrelevant information to pass on to his audience in an art house Chicago theatre. Meanwhile, Kumail Nanjiani, the scriptwriter, seems to be playing with the notion of a “cultural ambassador,” where he is literally presenting the “good, palatable things” about Pakistan that he knows with that arbitrary set of information; his memories, his mom’s cooking, cricket, and even India-Pakistan’s ever-so-tense politics, beyond the mainstream media discussions of terrorism and political instabilities in the South Asian country. He is looking at himself and his culture through American eyes in a desperate and hollow attempt to again prove that Pakistan is as mundane as any other American small-town. In the prelude to this scene, his comedy club friends emphasize the acting, costume changes, and wigs as the key components of this show, whereas Kumail, in the actual show as presented briefly in the film, appears to be doing a modified version of old-school PowerPoint presentation in a kurta with different set designs, in his own monotonous voice. There is no theatrical acting that his friends talked about, no wigs or costumes involved, except for the cricket gears, unless his traditional attire is considered a costume. The importance and relevance of the scene is also probably to set up for the dialogue that Emily delivers at the end of it, about how she did not get to know about him at all, and she probably was not looking for all the trivial information about



Pakistan. The dialogue can be a trope approach to romantic comedies, in which the lead characters keep trying to “know each other” better. His one-man show is probably not the best way to let people know where he comes from. If anything, the presentation with statistics and infographics offers an oblique sense of the information shared and sidesteps the awkward conversation about his family’s preferences, which does more damage to the image of Pakistan as an alien nation with their cotton and concrete, than anything else.

What Kumail is doing in this scene could be read as what Sara Ahmed called a “happiness duty,” where she argues that the migrant is obligated to remember their past as a happiness project, in lieu of their present life, that is definitely a step-up from where they come from. While she uses the lens of the history of colonization and the British Empire, the implications do offer a resonance in the way Kumail behaves. The scene comes across as a self-conscious performance of difference on Kumail’s end, as if to say, “This is all that you are to think I am.” Nanjiani, the scriptwriter, perhaps, takes this opportunity to offer up an intentionally ridiculous account of his culture as a way of drawing attention to the terms within which he might be legible enough to this certain audience, that transgresses beyond the Chicago art theatre. The one-man show, in a way, becomes analogous to the film itself; when it comes to representing Pakistan to the audience of the film; it is only Kumail who qualifies to stand in the podium, with whatever knowledge he might have at his disposal.

### **3.2 The Good, the Bad and the American Muslim Man**

In continuation with the discussion about who gets to be the preferred and favoured representative in the film as a character, especially a South Asian one, this chapter considers one

of the rarest moments next, where *The Big Sick* displays Kumail's relationship with his family in a deeper sense, especially with his brother, Naveed.

*(Kumail and Naveed eating at the batting cage snack shack, when Kumail tells Naveed that he is dating a White girl.)*

Naveed: I thought you were going to say you were involved in a hit and run or you got caught forging some checks. But a WHITE GIRL? Such a cliché.

*(A White family dining in the nearby table stares at them.)*

Kumail: It's okay! We hate terrorists!

Naveed: It's... just...*Sorry!*

*(The Big Sick 28:14 - 28:28)*

In the scene, Kumail accompanies Naveed to his failed attempts at baseball, which, according to Kumail's opening monologue, is just a version of cricket; the game that the British had brought during colonization to the Indian Subcontinent. The "Game of Gentlemen" once introduced to the "Indian" peasants to teach them proper sportsmanship ended up becoming a game that today's South Asians, more particularly Indians, dominate. Kumail tells Naveed, who is all, if not over, dressed in Chicago Cubs' baseball uniform, that he is dating a White girl. The scene is pivotal in *The Big Sick*'s running joke around the daily lives of Muslims in a post-9/11 US, and as one of the very few scenes where the focus is on a candid conversation between the Nanjianis, where the two brothers share a somewhat meaningful moment. Prior to the conversation about the "White girl," the brothers discuss how Kumail has embraced a secular, American life for himself, and how, according to Naveed, he does not look or talk like a "Pakistani" anymore. Naveed refers to the fact that Kumail calls cookies "cookies," and not "biscuits," which is a rather commonly used term for the baked confections among the South Asian communities.

Kumail counters the allegation with the fact that even “biscuit” is a British term, and the two are not necessarily the same kind of food items. The conversation suggests Pakistan, at least in Kumail’s point of view, has no culture or history outside of its colonial past. It appears in this witty fast-paced dialogue as a nation without an authentic culture to hold on to for the migrants; it really just might be a hybrid remnant of the British colonial culture. This scene is one of the rare ones in the film which makes a history visible and asks the viewers to think (if they notice) about the complexities of a country like Pakistan, with a rich historical and colonial past. The conversation demonstrates the incidental ways in which history structures everyday life still, and its effects remain uncertain.

The brothers share this light-hearted, jovial open banter, while fork-fighting over their shares of channa masala. The scene, much like any other scenes where there is a majority of Nanjiani characters present, displays overdone traces of South Asian-ness. The Nanjians pack their own ethnic lunch in a baseball batting cage, and they also joke about serious crimes like hit-and-run or money laundering to be lighter in comparison to dating a White girl, which could be seen as a self-deprecating anecdote about their backward and shifty immigrant practices that would draw these moral equivalences. Naveed’s euphemistic advice that Kumail can sleep with White girls before marriage if he wants to also suggests that he is destined to be paired with a Muslim woman no matter what. This comment also shows how Naveed seems to believe that a true Muslim bachelorette, the kind his mother would pick for Kumail, is not someone who would sleep around before getting married.

A closer observation of this scene unpacks more than just a glimpse of how the relationship is between the Nanjiani brothers and becomes a kind of Muslim inflected and gender

inverted Bechdel test<sup>18</sup> for Muslim men, where two Muslim men meet and discuss something other than jihad. Kumail's brother, Naveed, played by BAFTA winner British actor Adeel Akhtar, seems to be the version of an ideal son that his parents want: practices Islamic rituals, has his brother's back, grows a Muslim beard, and happily lives his conjugal life with the woman his parents chose for him. Naveed, and most of the South Asian characters in this film are written in a way that they remain forgettable, secondary inclusions, even though most of them are played by rather established actors. Bollywood veteran Anupam Kher who plays Kumail's father Azmat, for example, has acted in more than 500 films, and played the role of the father in Gurinder Chadha's *Bend it Like Beckham* (2002) as well. Zenobia Shroff, who plays Kumail's mother Sharmeen, might not have as many credits to her name as Kher, but does a good job in her limited yet colourful role. Akhtar is also the only other South Asian origin character in the film with some connection to Pakistan apart from Nanjiani, from his father's side. The casting choice reflects that the filmmakers know more than what the PowerPoint-like one-man-show discussed earlier suggests. The earlier absurdity of a colonial vision of Pakistan is here performatively challenged by the inclusion of a rich and varied professional acting class that is world renowned.

This scene does more than just further solidifying the nature of the relationship the two brothers share with their differences as individuals. The complexity of migrancy leads the different brothers to perform their roles in their own, ambivalent ways. Their methods of

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<sup>18</sup> Bechdel Test, according to bechdeltest.com, "is a simple test which names the following three criteria: (1) it has to have at least two women in it, who (2) who talk to each other, about (3) something besides a man. The test was popularized by Alison Bechdel's comic *Dykes to Watch Out For*, in a 1985 strip called *The Rule*" (bechdeltest.com).

managing the expectations of their family's culture and the US society are different, also probably because of their age and how deeply entrenched their lives were in Pakistan when they immigrated to America. We never see Naveed in an attempt to produce a one-man show about Pakistan, but he is also the only Nanjiani family member to ever attend it. Their ways of looking at the complexities of their struggles with their identities as a Muslim, a Pakistani and also an American, unveil the question of hybridity that Homi K. Bhabha praises as a mood for such individuals. Kumail's idea of a "good Muslim" is someone who embraces a White American ideology in the world of Islamophobia by alienating himself from his culture as much as possible. To Naveed, that is what a "bad Muslim" looks like; someone who abandons their heritage to become "American." They are both failures and successes. They cannot quite be right to either world or the one they share as brothers. While Kumail finds his solution in assimilation, Naveed resorts to mimicry, of both cultures he belongs to. Identity is a source of anxiety and a site of tension that is represented by Naveed. His excess performativity is an expression of the impossibility of fitting any predetermined role. Kumail, as a younger sibling, had Naveed to follow or not, but that was not the case for Naveed as a young immigrant. This scene in the film where we see Naveed try his best in being good at an American game becomes the moment of the human predicament of migrants who do not fit here or there. There is no socially legible pre-coded role that can actually fit Naveed, and so we see him anxiously trying to fit everywhere. Naveed, much like Apu in *The Simpsons* episode, "Much Apu About Nothing" (1996), displays a form of hyperpatriotic behaviour to confirm his Americanness. Naveed overdoes every role that he is assigned: of a loyal son, a loyal husband, a loyal Muslim, a migrant Pakistani, and a Chicago Cubs fan. His character in the film adds a structural dynamic regarding identity and migration, and the film chooses to resolve this as a matter of personality and character. Some

individuals can overcome these challenges, while some will not. The film sees the structures of power that condition social life but chooses to pretend it can dissipate them by offering up a narrative that shows one individual overcoming those conditions, as an affirmation towards the old, American belief. Sara Ahmed puts it aptly, “One wonders whether the happiness formula for the colonized rests also on the hesitation of the almost: almost happy, but not quite; almost happy, but not white” (S. Ahmed 130). In this scene, in between all the banters, the reality becomes visible that Naveed might be a sign of the always incomplete migrant assimilation project next to his brother who is happy, since he had made the jump. Kumail’s sense of integration and Naveed’s struggle in their conquest for happiness can also be described through Ahmed’s words,

And yet, migrants are under increasing pressure to integrate, where integration is the key term for the promotion of multicultural happiness. Although integration is not defined as “leaving your culture behind” (at least not officially), it is unevenly distributed, as a demand that new or would-be citizens “embrace” a common culture that is already given (137-138).

Kumail, however, seems to have gained this confidence as he has access to a more Americanized life, where he has White friends and now a White girlfriend, who seems to have given him a sense of accomplishment, that his brother, according to Kumail, certainly does not possess. Kumail seems to have access to a saviour who can make him stand apart from the communal identity he is not happy with, and his enduring love for American popular culture attests to that.

The film elects to solve structural problems immigrants face with personal solutions such as assimilation by recasting an old model that transforms relations of domination into relations of support and care that saw colonial power structures come to be represented as the art of White

men saving Brown women from Brown men. Yet in this film, the formula becomes White women saving Brown men from Brown women. Naveed is marginalized within the American social fabric despite his constant attempts at mimicry, and Kumail discerns the powerlessness of that approach. Kumail's way of getting out of that Brown powerlessness in America is to find strength in the White culture, marked by this joyful, humorous space of stand-up comedy, in assimilation, and in alienation from his own culture.

### **3.3 The Sickening Fantasies of the White Saviour Complex**

The dichotomy between Kumail and Naveed's personal struggles in attempts to fit into their American lives, as discussed in the previous section, points towards their individual ways of fitting in. For Kumail, his family appears to be the root of his problems, and his desired solution is to have minimal association with them to establish himself as a successful American import. Kumail's family is his malady; and he, throughout the film, seeks ways to recover from them. In the following scene, the last one to be discussed in this chapter, Kumail experiences a moment where he feels saved, and thus accepted, by Emily's mother, Beth, who, up until this point in the film, has been rather irritated with Kumail's presence in Emily's life, especially during her coma.

The scene takes place when Kumail's nature of lying to get out of an awkward situation leaves him with no choice but to bring Emily's parents to his comedy club on a night when he was not supposed to perform. In fact, he was expected at home for a dinner with his parents, where yet another eligible Pakistani woman was invited to meet him. Kumail avoids his family's calls as he accompanies the Gardners on that night before Emily's surgery. As he starts his unprepared set, a White frat boy type character heckles him, and asks him to go back to ISIS.

Beth takes offence with this heckling, while Kumail tries to avoid the situation, but fails, as the following confrontation proceeds,

*(Beth confronting a heckler during Kumail's set at the comedy club.)*

Beth: What did you just say?

White Frat Boy: I said he should go back to ISIS.

Beth: No, I mean that is a really confusing position. I mean, do you want ISIS to have more people?

*(The Big Sick 01: 01:00 - 01:01:12)*

While a clearly agitated Beth due to her daughter's unexplained illness and impending surgery is using this moment as an outlet to get rid of her built-up anguish, she does stand up for Kumail in a way, nobody, especially another White character in the film does. This heated encounter leads to a calmer night back at Emily's apartment, where Kumail finds himself being more comfortable with Beth now, as they go through Emily's old, high school photos together. This brawl-at-the-bar (in this case, the comedy club) scene ticks all the boxes as a White saviour one, as Hughey notes in his work,

[...] the white [saviours] are commonly positioned next to the two types of other characters to distinguish them and make them all the more bearable. First, the [saviour] is juxtaposed with racist, domineering, completely uncaring, and extremely violent white characters. Second, a non-white suffering a social malaise or ailment, surrounds the [saviour] and contextualizes his character development. The effect is powerful. Together, we have the [Saviour], the Bad White, and the Natives (48).

The scene might not appear to be at the extreme end as per Hughey's classification, but it does have the elements, which make it a classic White saviour moment. Beth is the mother figure



Kumail thinks he lacks in his life, who speaks up for him and roots for him even when her own daughter tells him to get lost. Beth's approach at motherhood is the kind Kumail admires as ideal, compared to the one his own mother offers, which is rather demanding and backwards for his taste.

Beth's role as a White saviour is compounded by the fact that she is a Southerner from North Carolina; not the urban White north. The common stereotype about the Southerners is that they are racist and indeed her husband, a Northerner, admits in first meeting Beth's family he was treated as an outlier. However, with Kumail, Beth embodies a cosmopolitan multicultural acceptance that spurns the Frat Boy's racist Islamophobia. Since her first meeting with Kumail, their relationship moves from disdain to her mothering him, defending him and finally, pushing Emily back to him. The trajectory that Beth and Kumail go through during the course of the film shows how Beth offers Kumail the kind of motherhood that he yearns for, but does not receive from his own mother, especially at a time when he knows that he is lying to his mother about the woman he loves. Beth, especially by the end of the film, thinks Emily and Kumail can overcome their differences, like she and Terry had. Her romcom fairy godmother perspective displays the difference between the two mothers even more profoundly. The Muslim Pakistani mother thinks only a Muslim Pakistani woman can be a match for her son, as the shared culture will be the binding agent for the couple. The White southerner mother, who married an urban northerner, Terry, who was everything her family initially had disapproved of, thinks that even with their glaring differences, Emily should take Kumail back, as he had been diligent, even when Emily was unconscious. The scene at the comedy club is one of those moments when Beth thinks it is her duty to save this Brown Muslim man, who she has been cold to up until that turning point.

The scene displays layers of White saviour attitude. First, the implication that it was okay for Beth to behave rudely with Kumail because of what he had done to their daughter and when it is between the three of them, but it is not fine for another White person to say racist slurs in the guise of a heckle to Kumail, at his place of work. She thinks she needs to step up and speak for this adult, capable man, who is constantly denying the “help” in this form of saviourism. The situation thus becomes an issue between two White people, where one is being the textbook saviour to a textbook bad apple, completely disregarding the voice of the coloured other, reinstating the powerlessness of his state. Besides this visible act of saviourism, there is implied one in the relationship between Kumail and the Gardners. He finds in them what he thinks he lacks in his own family. He sticks with them when they are in a crisis, and in return they reward his diligence with their trust and friendship. It is also possible that Kumail’s sense of commitment towards Emily as she lies unconscious in the hospital comes from seeing her parents there, and them not liking his presence at first. It becomes his mission to win them over, perhaps in the hope for a fresh start with Emily, and with a chance for having a family that sees and knows him for who he is, not who they expect him to be. Kumail might be perceived as the reluctant/accidental saviour of Emily as he was the one who signed the forms for her treatment in the hospital, and also the one who insisted not to move her to a different hospital when her mother wanted that to happen. In retrospect, it is the Gardners, especially Beth, who comes to Kumail’s life as saviours from the struggles of identity as discussed earlier in the chapter, that he faces. Kumail is fascinated by the candid openness and vulnerabilities of the Gardner parents, especially about their own troubled marriage, which is somehow resolved due to the uncertainties with Emily’s health. Kumail chooses to stick to this newfound family over his own.

The three scenes discussed in this chapter are rather marginal ones, irrelevant to the romantic comedy arc. These scenes, however, as examined in this chapter, complicate the film's positionality in terms of designing its South Asian characters, especially Kumail and Naveed as the 1.5 generation immigrants, struggling to find their identities in between the two cultures they are part of, while also finding their own, individual ways to find a place in the American social fabric. While Kumail tries to reimagine his childhood experiences only through the American eyes, Naveed strives, and often fails to see himself through the American perspective, to try and become a better, convincing citizen. Kumail's perspective of finding his family and their traditional ways responsible for his own cultural ambivalence brings him closer to Emily's family, who symbolize the perfect American metaphor when it comes to family values and relationships. His accidental saviour moment during Emily's illness brings him closer to her parents, especially her mother, where he sees a promise to have a family who he could overcome through his reluctance, and who, like himself, have flaws that might seem irrelevant to his own family, despite the fact that he never tries to learn more about them, and see their humane side as well. He looks at his family as an outsider, an American trying to endure the non-American aliens. It is important to note that the film does follow Kumail and the Gardners to offer them windows to be vulnerable, while the screen-presence of the Nanjianis with such profound moments are rare. Apart from the scenes with Naveed and Kumail and Kumail's big confrontation with his parents about Emily where his mother decides not to speak with him again, there are no significant moments for the South Asian characters to offer any relatability to the story. This dichotomy is even worse for the South Asian female characters. The next chapter discusses the complexities such an absence creates when it comes to the reception of the film.

## South Asian Visibility on Screen and the Duality of Receptions

As the third and final piece of the larger discussion of this thesis, this chapter shifts from the close-reading method in order to study the film's reception. The shift here is necessary since the study of the film alone cannot point towards the invisibility of Brown women or their absence, within and outside the screen, particularly in the North American context. Up to this point, I have argued that the film recycles old tropes of White saviour narratives, and even Islamophobia, while eliding the complex issues of identity crises of the immigrant communities. Now, I analyse the disparities in the reception to fully comprehend what the film does through its operations of erasure and absence of the South Asian female characters. I start with the comparisons between the two sets of reviews to examine the impact of the representation work, and then I briefly discuss Gayatri Spivak's work on subalterns and their voices, and how that connects to the overlooked criticisms by women of colour of the film.

In order to perform this analysis, I use Stuart Hall's 1973 essay, "Encoding/Decoding," where he explains how the producers in mass media have messages that they want to convey to their audience. While the world of mass media has certainly evolved a lot since Hall's essay, which had its own evolutions and critiques<sup>19</sup> as well, it still is applicable for this analysis.

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<sup>19</sup> Despite the age and multiple revisions of the work, Hall's theory continues to be foundation to reception theory in media. As Linda Steiner notes in the 2017 abstract of "'Wrestling with the Angels': Stuart Hall's Theory and Method," "Hall's pioneering 4-part model of encoding and decoding is used to illustrate a major theoretical intervention... [I]t justifiably inspired considerable work on the articulation of producer and audience work. (Steiner 102)"

According to Hall's hypothesis, when a team of people are producing a film, for example, they strive to offer a set of messages for their audiences to decode. These are the *encoded* messages that he talks about; the ones made for the audience to understand as the producers have meant for them to. However, all the audience might not have the same context to "decode" the message the way the producers have encoded it, and the mode of decoding depends on many factors surrounding the audience in question. Hall then hypothesized three different positions for a recipient of an encoded mass media message. The first position, which Hall called as the "dominant-hegemonic position" (171), is the viewer who, "takes the connoted meaning from, say, a television newscast or current affairs programme full and straight, and decodes the message in terms of the reference code in which it has been encoded" (171). Hall calls it an ideal-typical case, where the viewer "is operating inside the dominant code" (171). The prime focus of this chapter is to look at how the makers of *The Big Sick* encode their messages to hail their ideal dominant, preferred readers, or audience<sup>20</sup>. To further understand and analyze the impact and reception of the film, the chapter also looks at the other two categories of viewers that Hall had identified, who hold the "negotiated position" and the "oppositional position" (172-173). This chapter thus uses Hall's model of reception as a framework to map the varied and stratified reactions and reviews of the film, to explore how these received texts might be setting a tone for what the film does in a larger, cultural context.

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<sup>20</sup> The work done in chapter 1 of the thesis around the promotion and production of the film anticipates the analysis here by establishing how *The Big Sick* conforms to hegemonic American 'colourblind' whiteness.

#### 4.1 *The Big Sick*: A (White) American Critic's Choice

*The Big Sick* has been received rather well after its box-office release: it received mostly positive reviews in the popular American news media. Michael Phillips with the *Chicago Tribune*, a news media giant from the city the story is set in, calls *The Big Sick* “the medicine we need right now” (Phillips) in the title of his mostly approving, if not flattering review. Phillips is not the only one to join the legion of film critics and reviewers who had found the film delightful and refreshing. Geoff Berkshire with *Variety* thinks that the film deserves kudos for handling the risks of the cross-cultural complexities rather well compared to any other projects that might have dealt with the issue in the past, “Where most movies might be content to follow the culture-clash comedy through its typical ups and downs, *The Big Sick* proves to be a far messier affair, and all the more rewarding for it” (Berkshire). Berkshire does not go deeper into what those “ups and downs” or “messier affair” might be. Ann Hornaday with *The Washington Post* gives it a 4/4, and writes that the film, “winds up being one of the most satisfying films of the summer, and quite possibly the year.” She also opens her review with a comment on how *The Big Sick* offers a change of scene to the genre of romantic comedy itself,

As a genre, the romantic comedy has been on its last legs lately, mired in raunch and ribald jokes on the one hand, or insipid wish-fulfillment on the other. But an otherwise endangered form gets a welcome kick in the pants in [*The Big Sick*], an exhilarating, utterly endearing movie that feels like both a return to classic principles and a bracing [to] look forward [to] (Hornaday).

Many other critics with prominent news media outlets have sang praises of the film, and its unusual take on the genre, which, as Hornaday puts it, was tired of itself lately. She elaborates on

the film's realism and universalism of "human imperfection" in the following quote, "It's a movie that not only puts human imperfections and incongruities on display, but also revels in them. This is what love looks like, it seems to say, emblazoning those words on a 30-foot flag and letting it fly" (Hornaday). Her observation, however, ignores how the Brown characters are fixed in their imperfections while the White character(s) and the exceptional Kumail are able to improve themselves through the course of the film, with the privilege of redemption. These comments and observations by established American print film reviewers, along with remarks about the riveting performances by the recognizable names in the cast, such as Holly Hunter and Ray Romano, besides Nanjiani and Kazan, prove how the film and its relevancy had spoken to its preferred audience in a way that focuses on the film's form and heart-warming message of an inclusive America. The list of mainstream American reviewers who had a positive experience with *The Big Sick* also include fan-based circulations, such as, *Vulture*'s Emily Yoshida, who thought the film was a "joyful escape from summer tentpoles" (Yoshida). *Screen Rant*'s Sandy Schaefer notices that "Nanjiani's onscreen family members are not afforded as much screen-time as Emily's parents, but *The Big Sick* provides enough onscreen development time to prevent Nanjiani's parents and siblings from descending into stereotype and/or caricature" (Schaefer). Jimi Famurewa with *Empire* thinks *The Big Sick* is "Edgy and hilarious, Nanjiani and Gordon's true story of cross-cultural love is a Trump-baiting marvel that's worth the hype" (Famurewa). *The Toronto Star*'s veteran film critic, Peter Howell, also agrees with his American colleagues, and thinks "the supporting characters are all much stronger than the cardboard figures of glee seen in most romcoms. This includes the prospective brides chosen by Kumail's parents, who come across as real human beings and not just a mirthful montage (Vella Lovell's Khadija is particularly good)" (Powell).

Judd Apatow in one of his interviews with *The Hollywood Reporter*'s Annie Howard, said that he does not think the film sets out to make a social difference, especially during the then fresh political climate after the Trump administration started its course in the US. However, he thinks that the audience might have some takeaways from this film after all. Howard quotes Apatow, on how he assumes the target audience might think of the immigrants in the US after watching *The Big Sick*, "I don't know that much about a lot of people who immigrate to this country, and maybe I could tune in a little bit and be more compassionate" (qtd. in Howard). Apatow expects empathy towards immigrants from his target hegemonic White American audience. What is noteworthy in this comment is that Apatow assumes the film's audience to be oblivious to immigrant experiences in the US, not the ones who might be very well-acquainted with the lives of immigrants or be immigrants themselves. In another interview with *The LA Times*, Apatow mentions how the conflict that Kumail ensues with his immigrant family is one of the key reasons he felt intrigued by the story, besides Emily's medically induced coma and the couple's navigations around both medical and cultural complexities (Ordoña). Michael Ordoña quotes Apatow on how he finds the film to be, "about the immigrant experience in our country," and how, considering the political climate, *The Big Sick* has, "deeper meaning because our country wasn't treating immigrants the same way they were in the previous administration" (qtd. in Ordoña). Judd Apatow was interested in *The Big Sick* as a project not only because it offered great potential in telling an unconventional love story involving a coma, but that it was more of a story that had elements of immigrant experiences and he thinks it told the story of the immigrant experiences in the US, even though he did not anticipate a large percentage of his audience to be those with immigrant experiences. Apatow's promotional comments in the interviews on *The Big Sick* hail an Anglo-American audience who might not be very comfortable with immigrant



stories as romantic comedies. Simultaneously, his interviews ignore the potential audience for the film, who might have actual connections to immigrant narratives.

The mainstream newspaper critics mentioned above so far seem to be getting that message loud and clear, and they also seem to agree very gallantly to whatever the makers' professed aims were. According to a report by USC Annenberg Inclusive Initiative and The Time's Up Entertainment, titled, "Critic's Choice 2: Gender and Race/Ethnicity of Film Reviewers Across 300 Top Films from 2015-2017," 88.2% of top movie critics are White, where only 3.7% are underrepresented female critics (Choueiti et al.). It makes it quite understandable that the reviewers from most of these top news media outlets are most likely to be a White reviewer with little connection to immigrant narratives. Apart from Richard Brody with *The New Yorker*, who thinks that "*The Big Sick* [labours] under the curse of the relatable, the likable, the admirable. Despite the fact that the movie is rooted in personal experience, it seems impersonal—not universal, simply blank." Most of the major North American newspapers seem to have loved *The Big Sick* unconditionally, upholding their collective position as the dominant-hegemonic consumers of this production.

#### **4.2 Beholders of the Oppositional Gaze**

The film received mixed responses in the United Kingdom's left of centre paper *The Guardian* where reviewer Hadley Freeman felt a bit awkward when she watched the film. Her colleague, Peter Bradshaw found it to be a film that is very much on-brand for Judd Apatow, as he compares *The Big Sick* to *Knocked Up* (2007) and *Funny People* (2009), while identifying that the film is, "hardly revolutionary. It is essentially a rather conservative movie in which rules

and conventions, although challenged satirically, are not actually broken in the course of the story” (Bradshaw). Bradshaw gives the film 4 out of 5 stars and marks it as, “a stranger-than-fiction date movie of enormous charm and sweetness” (Bradshaw). His colleague, Freeman, had a bit of a different experience with the film. Freeman, who, in her review mentions that she went to watch the film with one of her British-Pakistani female friends, who at the end of the film, had a face displaying “a mix of weary amusement and intense irritation.” Freeman notes how, as a Jewish woman, she can relate to that kind of a reaction after a romcom experience, “It’s an emotion[al] salad I know well, because it’s the same one I have felt after too many romcoms and TV comedies made by Jewish men – the ones which ostensibly celebrate the power of love to cross boundaries but end up trashing women from their own culture in the process” (Freeman). Freeman articulates a position that Hall terms as a “negotiated decoder,” that expresses ambivalence. It is worth noting that the observation is not coming from the North American critics, the locale where the story is set. The British reviewers, who have their own fair, if not more intense and first-hand share of history with colonization and immigration, can identify the dents around that issue in the story. The American mainstream print media reviewers, however, remain largely oblivious to the way the film actively silences South Asian women. One cannot help but notice here the very different historical relationships the UK and the US have with Pakistan. The UK, being a former colonizer responsible for the infamous partition in 1947 and recipient of large numbers of Pakistani immigrants since, seem to have critics who can see beyond the gooey romance of an interracial couple, while the US, with a much more recent, often adverse political relationship overhyped by Islamophobia seems happy with the progress of having a Pakistani, Brown, Muslim male lead.

It is not just Freeman and her British-Pakistani friend who found the romcom a bit hard to stomach. Outside of the White-sanctioned film critics there was a regular and loud dissatisfaction with the film. Many online bloggers and activists thought the film could have used a better formula than the tired, old trope of trashing-the-Brown-people one. Aisha Mirza, a Brooklyn-based writer, and social worker, writes in *RaceBaitr* that she finds the movie “sad.” She admits that she had some hopes from the promise the film holds in what she thinks is a “representation drought,” and Nanjiani’s platform and voice through this film could “already [be] radical given the chronic de-sexualization of South Asian men” (Mirza). The radical promise of the film is quickly lost, however. Mirza puts it aptly, with her bitter sarcasm,

Most of the women being interviewed are characterized as dumpy, unintelligent losers, and one literally does a magic trick for the family in an act of bizarre South Asian minstrelsy. A South Asian family presented as obsessed with arranged marriage to the point of mania? What? The innocent man of colour trying to escape the clutches of his overbearing, barbaric, ignorant Muslim family so he may lay with his Aryan princess one more time? Never heard of it! (Mirza)

She continues describing how intense this feeling is for her, being a “queer, Muslim, South Asian person.” It was hard for her to watch “how desperate Kumail Nanjiani is to be liked by white people” (Mirza). Mirza elaborates the reasons behind her sadness even further,

It’s sad that a straight man of [colour] won this platform and managed to turn it into some kind of carnival of the model minority by making a film as devastating and disrespectful of brown women as if a white man had made it. It’s sad that this film signals the last time I will trust a straight man of [colour] to handle any matter at all with any decency. It’s sad that due to a legacy of systemic racism and acute lack of representation in media for

Black and brown people, there is a huge onus on the people who do have a platform to handle it with care.

Clearly, Mirza, a queer, Muslim, South Asian person did not have the same experience as Hornaday, and even Freeman and her British-Pakistani friend, who had discomforts after watching *The Big Sick*. How Mirza is placing herself in this array of receptions for the film could be what Stuart Hall called the “Oppositional Position”, where the viewer decodes the message the producers are trying to convey and rejects it. Hall elaborates, “He/she detotalizes the message in the preferred code in order to retotalize the message within some alternative framework of reference. This is the case of the viewer who listens to a debate on the need to limit wages but ‘reads’ every mention of the ‘national interest’ as ‘class interest’” (Hall 173). According to Hall, the oppositional viewer reads between the lines, and refuses to take what the producers have intended for a meaning for the message, while explaining his/her own positionality for the oppositional view. Hall thinks, “One of the most significant political moments is the point when events which are normally signified and decoded in a negotiated way begin to be given an oppositional reading. Here the “politics of signification” – the struggle in discourse – is joined” (Hall 173). The mainstream negotiated criticism of the film meets the oppositional view through a group of reviewers and commentators: the viewers of colour.

The fact that Mirza is a South Asian Muslim from London, England working in Brooklyn makes her reaction towards the film incomparable to Hornaday, and even to Freeman. Her experience of the film was something that the critics like Hornaday did not and/or could not put a finger on. The producer, Judd Apatow, as discussed earlier in the chapter, also might have not weighed in how the South Asian Muslim women, who are being portrayed as the random, disposable people good only for being a caricature of a character, and to end up in Kumail’s

cigar box collection of rejects, would react to such a treatment. According to *The Big Sick*, the nicest thing that the South Asian Muslim man can do to these women with no agency is to tell one of them, the character Khadija in this case, that she deserves better. The scene (*The Big Sick* 01:11:30-01:13:03) is important because this is the only moment when one of the cigar box ladies, who keep dropping in for appointments to meet Kumail at his parents' house, gets to speak to him in a somewhat confrontational manner. Khadija, played by Vella Lovell, who is not an actress of South Asian origin, audibly adds an accent to make herself more believable as a South Asian woman. Casting Lovell as the South Asian women with a voice can also be looked at how interchangeable women of colour are in Hollywood standards. In the scene, Kumail comes to drop Khadija off after she visits him and his family at their house with her parents. It is not clear why Kumail is dropping her off if she had visited his parents' place with her parents, but the conversation that follows is to note here. Khadija says how she has been to many of these appointments and how she wants to body-slam the women at her work who complain about their dating troubles. She also continues saying how her mother thinks she is becoming a "bruised apple," meaning she will not ever get married. The conversation takes a weird turn when Kumail tells her that he cannot marry her, and that she "deserves better," to which she replies, "People always telling me what I deserve. It's bullshit. And stop being so sorry about everything," with an insinuated Indian accent (*The Big Sick* 01:13:03). These mere two minutes of conversation is the most any of these rejected by Kumail South Asian women get to act as a human being. The other times, they are either making unsuccessful jokes about Kumail's obsession with *The X-Files* (*The Big Sick* 16:35), listing the kinds of breads they cannot eat (*The Big Sick* 36:03), or waiting for Kumail with his goofy, clueless family when he does not show up for dinner (*The Big Sick* 58:33). The scene (*The Big Sick* 01:11:30-01:13:03), however, remains disposable as

Khadija also seems to be a character who is just looking to be in a relationship so she can “just relax”. The South Asian women in this film, are thus not the kind who would value the true essence of a romance; they are just puppets extremely detached from their emotions and are ready to settle down with a guy who agrees to marry them in such an arrangement. *The Big Sick* looks at these young South Asian women, or at least Khadija, through the dominant culture’s perception of them. The likes of Khadija thus come across as hopeless victims of their parents’ culture, much like Kumail, but with no sympathy received.

Writing for the feminist website *Jezebel*, Aditi Natasha Kini extends this critique further and argues that *The Big Sick* re-establishes the notion that South Asian cultures are defined first and foremost by patriarchy such that “Hollywood’s depictions of brown men amount to an erasure of brown women. And that is not good enough” (Kini). Her insightful counter-hegemonic review, “I’m Tired of Watching Brown Men Fall in Love with White Women Onscreen,” aligns very well with what Tanzila “Taz” Ahmed, an activist from Los Angeles, expresses in her piece for *The Aerogram*, a curated website for South Asian “art, literature, life and news.” In her write-up, titled, “*The Big Sick* & Brown Romance in Pop Culture Narratives,” Ahmed positions herself as “a Muslim American woman with an unhealthy obsession for the romantic comedy genre,” and also as someone who was excited to see a Muslim Pakistani born comedian finally getting a big break through *The Big Sick*. She writes about her disappointment and questions if Hollywood is, “unable to tell Brown romantic narratives without grounding them in Whiteness?” She continues voicing her concerns by asking, “Is having a White love interest the only way we can convince mainstream culture consumers that our narratives are valid?” (T. Ahmed). Both Kini and Ahmed, find themselves in a rather negotiated position as a viewer, as Hall might recognize, compared to how Mirza considers *The Big Sick*. All of them are

aware that the film itself is well made and South Asian representation is much needed, but the representation, especially for how it dismisses South Asian Muslim women, is not enough, and not acceptable. Hazem Fahmy, a poet and critic from Cairo writes in *Film Inquiry* that *The Big Sick* offers a “depiction of Muslim American alienation [that] would not be a problem in the slightest if it wasn’t so rooted in an overt desire for assimilation, specifically assimilation to white Americanness” (Fahmy). Writing in *Vice*, Amil Niazi, who is a Pakistani immigrant in Canada, scrutinizes how the film treats its South Asian female characters, noting “How women of colour are manifested in those few stories that do make it to a larger audience is incalculably important; when we're not caricatures on-screen, we barely exist” (Niazi). Noor Hasan, in her guest blogpost in *Muslim Girl* writes,

In [*The Big Sick*], when the curly-haired-girl tears up and asks Kumail, “do you ever just want a relationship so you can just...relax?” is a loaded declaration and a confession that illuminates the complicated medley of pressure that characterizes the hegemonic approach to finding a life partner. Deep in the layers of this declaration are family pressures, unresolved feelings of desirability, the dissonance between the culture at home and the American one, and ethnosexualized stereotyping (Hasan).

She also mentions the frustration that many Brown women with immigrant identities have experienced with the film’s portrayal of women of colour aptly,

There’s a reason that many of us brown women are huddling together in theater lobbies after seeing [*The Big Sick*] to vent, discuss, and analyze what we’ve just seen. Our community is complicated and so are our stories, and it’s about time Hollywood prompts us to do more than just scratch the surface of stories about our endeavors (Hasan).

There are number of other activists, in addition to these people, who have found the representation similarly inhumane and disrespectful, but none of these opinions came through in the reviews of the film in the mainstream media. The one-time Kini's and T. Ahmed's perspectives are mentioned in mainstream comments on the film is in a piece written by one of the Indian- American staff writers of *The New York Times*, Sopan Deb, about how the film hits close to home for him. Deb did not write the first review of *The Big Sick* published in *The New York Times* but instead contributed this personal piece a month after Dargis' review was published on June 22, 2017. Deb responds indirectly to Dargis who finds the team effort that Nanjiani and Gordon have made to bring their story to life "makes the whole thing feel like a breeze," and Dargis thinks that both of them "vault over that hurdle with openness and delight, revitalizing an often-moribund subgenre with a true story of love, death and the everyday comedy of being a 21st-century American" (Dargis). While expressing his support of the film by drawing his personal stories, Deb also mentions both Kini and T. Ahmed, and how their discomfort with how the film deals with its South Asian characters, makes *The Big Sick* "the wrong target for this frustration" (Deb). His review-editorial is the only time when a major news outlet such as *The New York Times*, acknowledges the existence of the frustrations around *The Big Sick*, but only to silence these writers, who happen to be women of colour, of South Asian origins. The dominant hegemonic *New York Times* comes across as using Deb to silence the marginal negotiated, and even oppositional blog reading. The shushing of people, and especially women of colour has been one of the historical features of colonialism. *The New York Times* performing this sleight of hand and the film's narrative itself display how the colonial ghosts of silencing Brown women in expressing their discomforts about their own representation is something very much in action to this day.



### 4.3 White Women Saving Brown Men from Brown Women

The previous section considers the importance of a rhetoric and activity of White saviourism by exploring how this operates in the film's reception and not just within the narrative. Why is it that the South Asian and Muslim-identifying writers and bloggers see a version of White saviour attributes in *The Big Sick*, while the White critics working for media conglomerates do not even get a hint of it? This duality of experience is nothing new or unusual. Gayatri Spivak, in her famous essay, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" examines women of colour, especially in a post-colonial context as a subaltern- the people in the margins, and her exemplary work might be useful here to address this predicament. Spivak articulates that in a "collective fantasy symptomatic of a collective itinerary of sadomasochistic repression in a collective imperialist enterprise," she suggests, "White men are saving brown women from brown men" (Spivak 48-49). Spivak's work, originally published in 1985, with the most recent republishing in 2010 as a collection of essays from scholars and thinkers who explore the breadth of the essay through their own work, continues to be revisited as a source of critique, and conversation, and keeps contributing into the ongoing intellectual discourse regarding marginalized South Asian communities and individuals, including the writers of colour who feel violated by the caricaturised representation of South Asian Muslim women in *The Big Sick*. Spivak originally speaks to a colonial perspective, where the British colonizers in India tried to "save" Brown Hindu women, more particularly the widowed ones, from killing themselves in the incineration of their recently deceased husbands to escape the ordeals of a Brahmin widow life, by imposing a law against the custom of incinerating a "sati," the self-sacrificial widow. Throughout the film, the Brown women are mostly treated as a backdrop, if not the major opposing force against what

Kumail is looking for in his life, in order to confirm his “happiness.” Even though his family is portrayed as the sheer opposite to what the Gardner family comes across as, there are somewhat redeeming moments between Kumail and his brother (as discussed in chapter 2) and his father (*The Big Sick* 01:53:14). The film, however, gives its audience no reason to form a sense of sympathy towards his mother, who is designed as this smothering figure, reluctant to let her endeavors to control Kumail’s life and not allow him to live a little. Kumail’s mother’s character, Sharmeen, played by Zenobia Shroff, is everything that is wrong with his life, and the film’s treatment of Pakistani women. Kumail’s sister-in-law, Fatima, played by Bollywood actress Shenaz Treasury, does not really have much of a role to play. She just sits on dinner tables and couches, looking pretty in ethnic clothing, with a neckline that many Pakistani Muslim families, if they are anywhere near the restrictions Kumail’s seem to follow as Muslims and Pakistanis, might not approve as a modest way to dress. Kumail is also surrounded by these single, eligible women of Pakistani origin, who have no sense of comedic timing, think they are cool since they can do petty magic tricks, but basically are sore losers and bruised apples at the bottom of the bucket because they agreed to parade around people’s houses for arranged marriage. These women, thus become the 21<sup>st</sup> century equivalent of agentless self-sacrificial widows, comparable to Spivak’s description. The film never clarifies what these women do for a living, and what their lives are like, other than trying desperately to get picked up by part-time Uber driver, full-time stand-up comedian eligible bachelors like Kumail. It is fair to say that it is not their story, but also, how is it not? If these women and their existence in the script was just a filler of some sort, to give the romcom couple a reason for the big fight scene (*The Big Sick* 31:27-34:30) and to set up the central conflict, then why is it necessary for Kumail to burn all the pictures of these women, to show his devotion to Emily? (*The Big Sick* 01:40:00- 01:43:00). If this film is, like

*The New York Times*' Sopan Deb mentions in his homage piece, "the wrong target for this frustration" (Deb), then why is Kumail's love and dedication during Emily's coma alone not enough to regain Emily's trust and hand in marriage? Kumail literally holds a jar full of ashes from the pictures of those women he had burnt, and refers to those as, "the ashes of all the Pakistani women," and Aisha Mirza aptly puts it as "traumatizing" for a Brown female audience. Spivak, in her essay, talked about how, under British Colonialism, White men tried to save Brown women from turning into ashes like that, which Brown men were inflicting on them. Fast forward to 2017, and Kumail Nanjiani, a Brown man in his quest to achieve his "American Dream" finds comfort in burning the pictures of the South Asian women that he had chosen to hoard, as a peace-offering to his White girlfriend. The point to be made here is the asymmetry: what he is doing with their pictures; whether keeping them in a cigar box or burning them is not something any of these women would approve of or has any relevance to his commitment to his girlfriend, as he never really had any relationship with any of them. The modesty and integrity of these women are violated as the arranged marriage system is shown to be broken by Kumail. His actions assert his dominance and patriarchy over these women: he can do whatever he likes with the photos, keep, or burn them as per his convenience. He burns the photos to show Emily how her love had made him capable of taking that violent step; how her love had "saved" him from these Pakistani women he finds no interest in. Spivak's quote can be revisited here, with perhaps a twist that, the "White woman is saving [this] Brown man from Brown women." The list of Brown women he refuses includes his own mother in a cinematic echo of the assimilative cultural script established by *The Jazz Singer* as discussed in Chapter 1.

This implication, unfortunately, goes beyond the screen, and into the way the negotiated and counter hegemonic reviewers such as Kini, T. Ahmed, and Mirza experience the film. These

Brown women, unhappy with the way the representation of South Asian people was handled by the film, raise their voices but their concerns never reach the volume and density of those dominating the mainstream media reception of the film. Another metric of recognition and appreciation is needed for such oppositional voices, then, one that identifies how “emotions do things, and they align individuals with communities—or bodily space with social space—through the very intensity of their attachments” (S. Ahmed 119). Such an approach offers an alternative to finding validation in the “White gaze” which, as the film explores so inadequately, continues to justify the obsession with being accepted by “White” America. The alternative represented by South Asian Muslim film critics represents a new expression of an “Oppositional Gaze,” a term that bell hooks coined to identify Black female audiences as individuals who would speak the truth to return the gaze of White culture as well as Black men. This oppositional gaze can be applied to these Brown female spectators as well, who are looking with resistance, as bell hooks mentions, “In resistance struggle, the power of the dominated to assert agency by claiming and cultivating ‘awareness’ politicizes looking relations- one learns to look a certain way in order to resist” (hooks 289). It is the look that threatens to destabilize the hegemonic ideology: the one that the producers of such films are trying to avoid when they continue to promulgate the idea that Brown men can be acceptable by the White America, as long as they find their freedom in a maximized Whiteness. They can only do so in one way, by portraying a caricature of their culture and reassuring how where they come from is backwards and injurious. They make sure that if there is an upheaval against such a representation, it will be shut down in advance as something impossible to imagine.

## Conclusion

*The Big Sick* offers a rare sight: it establishes a Muslim lead in a romantic comedy in a post-9/11, Trump-era America and tells a heartwarming story in a politically tense and divided atmosphere. Many critics and mainstream audience could also feel the warmth radiating through the screen, as they embraced the cross-cultural romance and its quirky, out-of-context, exotic-enough Muslim immigrant family. It might not be a perfect date movie, but it indeed is a party-pleaser and conversation-starter, especially during all the tensions around the immigration policies and the infamous Muslim Ban<sup>21</sup>. In the political climate of 2017, when late-night show hosts and stand-up comedians took it upon themselves to comment on the hilarity, insanity, and uncertainty of the Trump presidency and its attempt to normalize Islamophobia, this film about a Muslim immigrant stand-up comedian serves as a useful conversation piece to address the xenophobic elements of Trump's brand. *The Big Sick* is promoted as a story that successfully transgresses the racial boundaries to that fairy-tale happily ever after, even with its expected

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<sup>21</sup> Executive Order 13769, which was officially titled as, "Protecting the Nation from Foreign Terrorist Entry into the United States," became more popularly known as the "Muslim Ban" in the U.S. This is was one of the first major, yet highly protested and debated Executive Orders (EO) signed by President Trump after assuming office on 25 January 2017. Leti Volpp writes in an essay titled, "Passports in the Time of Trump," that the EO, "suspended the entry of immigrants and non-immigrants (temporary visitors) from Iran, Iraq, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Syria and Yemen for a period of ninety days" (156). Volpp also writes, "the ban could be conceptualized as a travel ban, a Muslim ban, and a refugee [which] ban created different possible bases of identification. It also created different lines of connection and condemnation: This was discriminatory on the basis of religion. This was the product of a racialized Islamophobia" (167).

hiccups, which is aptly described by the subtitle itself, “An Awkward True Story,” as a way of suggesting that a kinder, more inclusive American Dream still lives while the then President was bent on generating second-class citizens.

This thesis offers an analysis of *The Big Sick* as well as analysis of its reception and promotion that seeks to understand how the film uses the rare window to the immigrant experiences in America that Apatow thought was the entire film. The immigrant lives represented in the film, as parts of the first and second chapter of the thesis examine, are always boring, embarrassing, shallow, overcrowded and/or chaotic; wide open to the public eye, to be surveyed and scrutinized, whereas the White family gets to share quiet, mellow one-on-one time. The immigrant family seems to be unable to display a sense of privacy (i.e., Kumail’s father thinks he hacked his cousin’s Facebook): one of the hallmarks of the Western civilization mission. How the South Asian immigrant family is presented in the film, as identified, and criticized by the predominantly South Asian female critics discussed in the third chapter, compared to the White American family in *The Big Sick*, affirms the perils of representations that can set a discourse for how certain immigrant lives are to be looked at in an American setting, which is resonated in the mainstream White American reviews of the film.

The sheer lack of agency attributed to most of the South Asian characters in the film dehumanizes them and makes them appear as colourful individuals who exist in the narrative only to the extent that they serve to generate the appearance of multiculturalism. *The Big Sick*’s audience is never encouraged to care about the wide array of South Asian characters, and/or sympathize with them: the film is not designed that way. The South Asian Muslim characters thus remain exotic and disposable; we never really get to see them in their flesh, being vulnerable and relatable. This thesis has unpacked how the film serves as a White saviour

narrative, while dismissing the marginal voices as it uses those to establish the dominant-hegemonic reception of the film as an effective colourblind project for Hollywood that turned out to be both a box-office and critical success. The danger of accepting such representations of common people of the racially minority groups is that they set a scripted reality for the living people they try to embody. The screen culture of flattening of the South Asian Muslim immigrants thus becomes the new normal, where it is established that all the children of South Asian immigrant parents are to find salvation in their White counterparts, and the ones who do not, are not to be trusted. Somehow, this generalization is even more damaging than the terrorist stereotype; at least with the latter, the excuse for the Muslim immigrants was that not all Muslims are terrorists! It becomes harder to defend one's culture and belief system when the everyday people, like someone's parents, are presented as psychotics who hack other people's social media without batting an eye and shun their own children for wanting to live their lives. New York-based Indian organizer, Monica M. writes in *Wear Your Voice*, "an intersectional feminist publication," about how Mindy Kaling's Netflix teen series, *Never Have I Ever* (2020), "effectively normalizes casteism, Islamophobia, purity culture, and racial supremacy in what it presents as a relatable experience of [brownness]" (M). M. notes that such representations reinstate tired, problematic, and injurious tropes:

Too often the liberal taxonomies of "new diversity" programming [is] used to help further old tropes of anti-Blackness, casteism, misogyny, islamophobia, and fatphobia.

Where a creamy elite in each of our communities of colour reifies these hegemonies with lazy storytelling and visual language rooted in diversity, not real equity (M).

Monica M stresses that the essay she writes is rather a "call to action" for the South Asian American communities, which she is a part of, to remind her fellow community members that,

“[South Asian Americans] deserve better storytelling. And that *how [South Asian Americans] watch* is as important as *what [South Asian Americans] watch*” (M). Monica M’s reaction to the narrative arc of the representations of Brown, South Asian experiences embedded in the White gaze is comparable to how this thesis examines the certain voices of diversity in this #MeToo era with a rising concern around hate crimes against Asian communities in North America. It is also important to note that this critical article does not appear in mainstream TV review and print venues but on the margins, where women of colour, of South Asian origins, continue to challenge how multicultural cosmopolitan America seems mired in tired Hollywood tropes that do not speak to ‘new ethnicities’ (Hall).

This thesis on *The Big Sick* wants to open doors to imagine what would a wider study look like that examined post-9/11 and post-2016’s Presidential Election in the US, South Asian Muslim people in mainstream and streaming media. Has the promise of Netflix, Amazon, Apple TV+ etc. to diversify stodgy White male-dominated Hollywood succeeded in the #MeToo and Trumpian era? For this thesis, *The Big Sick* suggests that South Asian Muslim women have not yet risen to the position of lives that matter or lives that belong within a racially divided America.



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