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MAGAZINE

THE INSPIRATION OF SHEETAL SHETH

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If there's one thing the 47-year-old actor, author, and activist wants you to know, it's that you can do anything you want.

Sheetal Sheth made a striking entrance into the spotlight with her remarkable performance in the groundbreaking film “ABCD,” fearlessly embodying the lead character—a young Indian American girl navigating the intricate dynamics of family and tradition. Across a career spanning over 20 feature films, Sheetal has consistently embraced bold choices, exploring themes such as open marriage and LGBTQ storylines long before they became widely discussed topics.

Her influence extends far beyond the silver screen. She has graced popular TV shows and lent her voice to iconic series like *The Family Guy*, showcasing a versatility that knows no bounds. Her voiceover talents have left an indelible mark in films such as Ang Lee's *Life of Pi* and video games like “Far Cry.” In addition to her artistic prowess, Sheetal is a staunch advocate for representation and diversity in the world of entertainment. Through her books, social media presence, and the characters she embodies, she fearlessly raises pertinent issues, challenging the industry to strive for authenticity and inclusivity.

ADVOCATING FOR AUTHENTIC REPRESENTATION

She has been a part of the Western entertainment industry for an extended period and is well-positioned to articulate its flaws, particularly concerning the portrayal of South Asians. Sheth's recently released book *Bravo Anjali!* served as a catalyst for a conversation about breaking cultural and gender norms, particularly with its closing line, “We can do anything we want, little one, anything at all.”

Sheth raises a thought-provoking question—what if South Asians faces were part of the traditional casting choices in mainstream production of films and television shows in Hollywood? Would the departure from the norm been instrumental in providing an opportunity to present characters in a way that goes beyond ethnic or racial expectations?





CHALLENGING THE STATUS QUO

What if? The very same question arose in Sheth's mind as she read an interview with Martha Kauffman, the co-creator of *Friends*. In the interview, Kauffman was questioned about the lack of racial diversity in the main cast, prompting Sheth to question not only Kauffman and David Crane, the creators of *Friends*, but also all content creators from the past. Inspired by the interview, Sheth pondered the absence of non-Caucasian characters in a show set in the diverse melting pot of New York City.

A distinguished and award-winning actress, author and producer, Sheth raises the point that these shows, while successful, did not authentically represent their broad audience, which encompasses people of various races. "We grew up watching predominantly white centered media, did we not enjoy it? Of course we did. We connected to the feelings, we connected to what was going on, we connected to the narratives, the conflict," she observes that there has been a tendency to create content for a specific audience in the past, telling specific stories. "To assume that someone who's white can't appreciate content, just because people of color are at the center of it, I think is underestimating the power of good storytelling," said the versatile actor.

EMPOWERMENT AND DIVERSITY

Since we celebrate the strength, resilience, and achievements of women in March, Sheth reminds us that the possibilities for South Asian women are boundless, transcending the constraints imposed by societal norms or in this case, Hollywood. "We can do anything we want. But these constructs in the business and the need to put us all in certain boxes are telling us that we can only be one thing," she says. It encapsulates the essence of breaking free from limitations and embracing the diverse potential that lies within every woman. The representation of Indian Americans in Hollywood could have been influenced by a variety of factors. Several challenges may have impacted the visibility and success of Indian Americans in the entertainment industry. These could have been limited opportunities, target audience, casting choices and cultural stereotypes. These stereotypes may have perpetuated certain expectations and hindered the development of nuanced and diverse characters.



DREAMING BEYOND BORDERS

Consider the prospect of a South Asian actor stepping into the shoes of iconic characters like Vivian Ward in *Pretty Woman*, Carrie Bradshaw in *Sex and the City*, or Rachel Greene in *Friends*. The task of replacing these unforgettable roles and envisioning someone else in their place is undeniably formidable. However, various ‘foreign’ actors have successfully carved out their space, breathing life into equally iconic characters. From the timeless elegance of Sophia Loren and the captivating performances of Salma Hayek and Marion Cotillard to the modern charm of Mila Kunis and, more recently, Gal Gadot holding her own in the DC galaxy of superheroes, these actors have proven that talent transcends borders.

Sheth, who has appeared both on the silver screen as well as on popular TV shows, willingly embraced the task of reimagining memorable scenes from influential female-centric films and shows, aiming to showcase that a character portrayed by a brown woman can wield the same impact. Sheth’s objective is clear—to demonstrate that if given the chance, brown women could have left an equally indelible mark,

altering the trajectory for those who would come after, and creating a platform for them to shine. This departure from conventional casting choices would have paved the way for increased diversity and representation in Hollywood.

REDEFINING REPRESENTATION

“I wanted to really show that we’re all like a blank slate. You can start there and you can turn into anything. We shot all of these in one day. The whole point of being an actor is to transform and create into other beings, to tell someone’s story. We created all of those things from this blank canvas. I really wanted to give homage to these amazing characters that I grew up loving. And also remind everybody that we can be all of those things and make it our own,” she explains the idea behind recreating these iconic looks and challenging traditional casting norms.

Through a series of six iconic looks paying homage to characters she admired growing up, Sheth showcases the transformative power of representation, illustrating that anyone can embody the essence of these iconic characters. Sheth’s journey is a testament to the evolving landscape of representation in Hollywood. As she continues to break barriers, her words echo a powerful sentiment: “We can do anything we want, it’s time the industry not only recognizes the diverse narratives waiting to be told, but to also put their full financial support and resources behind these projects.”





BEYOND PREDEFINED NARRATIVES

Historically, Hollywood has been guilty of pandering to narratives that follow predictable paths and stereotypical representation. Sheth who has been in showbiz for over two decades, boldly exposes the hypocrisy. “I’ve experienced this all the time. When I’m pitching and developing things, because I’m not dealing with people who understand the nuance of who we are, they’re always like, where’s the Indian part? Where’s the struggle? Where’s the poverty? Where’s the religion? Where are all the things that they equate South Asia to?” the accomplished actor and author shared her experience dealing with stereotypes prevalent within the industry.

Sheth sees this as a powerful message against the constructs that have confined individuals to predefined roles in the entertainment industry. “My books are slice of life stories about this little Indian American Girl. But her race is not the central part. It shows that we also play musical instruments, have dinner with parents and play sports. It’s not always about Diwali and Holi,” said the best-selling author who has recently signed up with Penguin Random House.

BREAKING STEREOTYPES AND OPENING DOORS

Sheth actively champions representation, employing her voice across various platforms—be it through her books, social media, or the characters she brings to life—to address and highlight the importance of diverse representation in the entertainment industry. She raises the issue of stereotyping. She dismantles the notion that content featuring people of color must adhere to predefined struggles or cultural elements. She challenges the industry’s assumptions, asserting that audiences can appreciate stories that don’t solely focus on expected themes.

While recognizing the achievements of certain South Asian figures in the industry, Sheth emphasizes the presence of notable progress. It extends beyond merely featuring characters cast in stereotypical roles that fulfill exotic expectations. “We find ourselves in a position where we’ve made the deliberate choice to chart our own course. The success we’ve attained is a testament to our resolve not to wait for doors to be opened for us; instead, we’re determined to open them ourselves,” she stated.

ENCOURAGING NUANCED STORYTELLING

Sheth points out that while progress has been made, there’s still work to be done. She laments the industry’s inclination to greenlight familiar narratives, often centered around weddings, religion, or mythology, due to a lack of understanding of the nuanced, everyday experiences of South Asians. “For me, it’s about educating and hopefully finding allies, partners, who get the nuance and who realize we’re not a monolith. Who realize there are lots of different stories in between the weddings, and the religion and the poverty and all the

things that they're used to seeing. Not everything is Slumdog Millionaire," she states emphatically acknowledging the ongoing struggle.

Drawing from her own experiences, Sheth encourages the next generation to be authentic and true to themselves. "Make what resonates with you," she advises, emphasizing the importance of individual voices in breaking through the noise of the industry. She highlights the democratization of content creation with digital tools and streaming platforms, making it easier for aspiring creators to bring their stories to life. "The winds change all the time; trends are trends for a reason. So make what you want to make. Whether it is a piece of art, a movie or a TV show, piece of photography, whatever it is, make what resonates with you," she advises.



FOSTERING CHANGE

Sheth underlines that the absence of representation is a missed opportunity, as the market consistently shows an appetite for diverse narratives. Reflecting on her experiences, she notes a shift in the mindset of South Asian artists. "We are powerful. We're not going to wait

for anyone to open the door for us; we’re gonna do it ourselves,” she asserts, highlighting the determination and resilience that have propelled the community’s success.

By bringing these iconic roles to life once more, Sheetal underscores the words of the character in her book, reiterating the empowering message: “We can do anything we want, little one, anything at all.”

PQ SUGGESTIONS:

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