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Popularity Or Political Correctness- A Closer Look At The Big Bang Theory

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Abstract

The Big Bang Theory (TBBT) is an American television situation comedy (sit-com) that began its broadcast in 2007 and ended in 2019 after 12 seasons. It enjoyed success with close to 20 million viewers watching it in the US and millions more globally. The sit-com revolves around 5 people-Sheldon, Leonard, Howard, Raj & Penny. While the four men are scientists each representing a specific field, Penny, the sole woman in the initial season, is a waitress working in a nearby eatery. The episodes are woven around the character dynamics of these 5 principal characters and the unlikely friendship that develops between them despite the disparity. In time, more characters, complex situations and changing relationship equations, add to the comedic elements of the sit-com. The series received credit and criticism in equal measure. An article in TheGuardian aired a critic's opinion as "the most popular sit-com I love to hate". Here-in lies the research question and curiosity. Why does The Big Bang Theory invite such opposite emotions? What elements in the sit-com lead to such conflicting stands? Are these opposing stands justified? Through a narrative analysis of the episodes, a better understanding is expected. The sit-com, though shamed by critics, was welcomed by viewers. This dichotomy deserves to be studied & greater reflection required. The present paper 'Popularity or Political Correctness: A Closer Look at The Big Bang Theory' is an attempt towards that.

Key Terms: Sit-com, Popularity, Political Correctness, Dynamics, Complexities, TBBT

Introduction

Limiting Dimensions of the TV Sitcom-The intrinsic nature of the situation comedy being what it is-limited to twenty odd minutes-results in considerable flaws in the storytelling process. Most critics complain that story points are forcibly controlled to adhere to the limited time, never allowed to develop into a situation with greater potential than the curtailed version. Artificially simplified and devoid of the complexities, sit-coms remain one-dimensional at most. Given that humour elicits the expected audience attraction, it is often insensitive and sometimes hurtful as "non-animated sitcoms contain frequent hints of malicious and character-based humor". (Zsila, Oros, Demetrovics & Urban,

2020) as is often seen in the way Sheldon Cooper's barb disturbs the character it is aimed at. The power and potential of humour being what it is-ability to convey critical issues with comparative ease-there is the additional burden to relate the popular opinion of the community/society often leading to preachiness. This is seen by many as an imposition. This oscillation between wanting to take forward a specific agenda in all earnestness and trying to be funny makes for tedious television viewing. (Berman, 1987). Additionally, characters in sitcoms seldom reach a point of complete development, in that, most remain underdeveloped, skeletal images of real people. Many critics also argue that sitcom characters are rarely expatiated to represent well edified people. They remain mere caricatures, created specifically to feed the comedic scene, garnering greater laughter at frequent intervals with their foolishness, thereby helping the principal character to gain presence. The sitcom storyline rarely affords the space for characters to 'come into their own', what is seen as a narrative stasis over development. (Klika, D. 2017).

'The Whole Nine Yards'?--Not The Big Bang Theory-When the American sitcom began to be broadcast in 2007 few envisaged that it would merit the level of audience support it did. Falling back on the usual tropes (Williamson, 2008) of the sitcom genre vis-à-vis troubles navigating friendship, complications of love, awkwardness with family members, everyday misunderstandings taking on giant proportions, money issues with comical consequences, workplace dynamics and competition-TBBT (Bednarek M, 2012)was different; since all these situations involved not 20-year-old white men and women as expected but 3 white men, a white woman and an Indian man-all well into their early 30s. Further, the men were not 'jocks'(physically well endowed but with questionable intellect) in any sense, but scientists working for a reputed university, shared a passable camaraderie with one another, were extremely awkward in matters concerning love, romance & sex. With the exception of Penny, the principal female character of the first few seasons, the 4 men were (what is commonly referred to in American society) 'nerds', a derogatory term almost, to signify people who are good in theoretical and academic matters but failures in everyday situations. Endowed with a generous proportion of science information, the men making frequent mention of superhero characters, exhibiting an obsessive interest towards comic book characters to the exclusion of everything else in their lives; TBBT was different to other sitcoms of its time (Bednarek M, 2012). This difference aroused the initial viewer curiosity and the humour, the punch lines, the characters and situations (many of which were seen as cliched) managed to sustain the curiosity for 12 seasons.

While TBBT is to be lauded for quite a few firsts-making heroes out of unlikely characters such as 4 university scientists, the blonde heroine shirking her 'pretty' status and succeeding in the competitive world of pharma sales, the Indian man present not only for his exotic value but is an important character addition reflecting the changed demography of American society-it failed on

many counts. The sitcom (Wamsler, I. 2007) perpetuated stereotypes (scientists, blonde women, Indians, society of the American South), concerned with the issues and life of only the 4 principal white characters, the Indian character is mostly played for 'laughs' & comic benefit, never achieving his character arc despite his 12-year presence. The sitcom (Berman, R. 1987) raises many issues but fails to go deeper into them, always falling short of a comprehensive discussion and closure. It begins with a lot of promise but chooses to remain a sitcom playing to the gallery week after week. While it was popular with a certain section of the audience, it also saw vicious criticism in its time. (Harbour, W. 2015)

Review of Literature

Gendered portrayals and stereotypes on television

There are several studies that have shown a great extent of gender stereotyping in television content. Scholastic readings have also been undertaken by many researchers to study the correlation between gender and advertising and how men and women are characterised in the media. Gender stereotypes have been extremely prevalent in mass media. Stereotypes are considered problematic when they restrict opportunities for one cadre of society to dominate over the other. Gender portrayals also have possible long-term effects on corporate branding and consumer behaviour that make it essential for customers to understand the cultural norms of the society while watching an advertisement. Studies have also been conducted to understand and evaluate the individual differences in their perception of behaviours that are considered acceptable for men as well as women. Individuals who believe in rigid gender roles are also accepting of restricted forms of behaviour deemed acceptable for men (Ibrahim Alibrahim, 2017).

  The first thing that comes to mind when one thinks of portrayal of women in the society, is the several popular stereotypes associated with it. We need to think about positions women have held over several years in society and the portrayal of women in the role of poets, artists, and prophets. The images of women portrayed in TV serials have the potential to change the thought processes of people in society. Women in many television programmes have been shown as self-sacrificing, and continuously suffering through a series of mishaps and have been depicted as non-thinking human beings. Women in these serials are often affected by the patriarchal order of the society. Hindi cinema or Bollywood has constantly underrepresented women. Women are often seen as conforming to the values upheld by the members of the society (Jain & Pareek, 2018).

        Research has made it extremely clear that women are underrepresented in the media and even when they are presented in the media, they are shown majorly in stereotypical roles. However, recent developments in the television landscape have come to show that there is indeed a change

that is seen in the representation of men and women in the media. Genres like soap-operas and teenage TV series do show an equal distribution of screen space for men and women as well as very less stereotyping in gender portrayals of the same. Narrowcasting is a term very prevalent when it comes to gendered representation. It means that organising user groups into specific audience markets started from the 1980s in the United States. This meant that specific gendered groups were targeted via specific programming and advertising content. Following this pattern, we term narrowcasting on channels that explicitly target either a female or a male audience as 'gender-targeted' channels (Daalmans, Kleemans, & Sadza, 2017).

   Of the many influences that have been discussed in society, media comes as the most pervasive and one of the most powerful sources of persuasion. Woven throughout our daily lives, the media insinuates its messages into our consciousness at every turn. Media constantly communicates messages that get ingrained in our consciousness every second given the fact that we are constantly surrounded by media (Wood). What we perceive about gender differences is the fact that men and women live in different gender universes. The social environment that we live in can influence the kind of behaviour and attitudes that we showcase about and around the topic of gender.

       Bussey and Bandura (2004) while researching on social cognitive approach suggested that the mass media, in addition to ongoing input from parents and peers, offer a "pervasive cultural modelling of gender roles". When looking into basics, one can understand that the representation of any form of gender in media tells us something about the power dynamic that exists amongst them. Women make up more than one half of the population and any form of non or under representation in the cultural landscape of media speaks a lot about the mass media that we are surrounded with. Research conducted on US media tells us that men and women are represented in the ratio of 3:2 respectively in the social media landscape, especially standard television programming. Research on violence in media suggests that children are more susceptible to media influence than adults because they are still in the process of developing social cognitive structures. This suggests that a major cause of concern is the kinds of representations that children are exposed to. The gender imbalance in video gaming is even more problematic. In one study of video games, 72% of the characters were male, whereas only 14% were female. With many such examples, there is a closer need to look at how media influences people and their view of gender (Greenwood, 2010).

       Social media has been a huge force in the dissemination of gendered ideas among the society. They are considered as a major communication channel for making opinions, exchanging information, influencing decisions and business promotions. Social networking affects the users' perceptions and choices regarding their activity planning. The increasing time that users spend on social media with their friends and followers is derivative of how they perceive their relationship

with others. Social media not just platy a role in social networking but also influencing decisions, for example, on what to eat and where to travel. With it being such an important tool for communication, there are different facets of gendered opinions that come into force (Karatsoli & Nathanail, 2020).

Media and Representation of Race

There has been an interplay of humans and technology across the digital landscape. Social media has played a huge part in people reflecting the same in the society. An increased attention has been given on how these social media pages like Facebook and Twitter are playing a role in mediating and amplifying newer forms of issues on hate speech and racial representation. As social media is garnering more and more attention and has come to dominate the socio-economic and socio-political landscapes that we live in, racist practices still take place on these platforms. Social media contribute to reshaping "racist dynamics through their affordances, policies, algorithms and corporate decisions" (Matamoros-Fernández & Farkas, 2021).

Media has been a large repository of racial and ethnic representation that can influence people's perception of themselves. Individuals consume as well as help to produce media portrayals of race and ethnicity. These portrayals influence racial and ethnic identity development through a number of psychological processes that include categorization and social comparison. In addition to interacting with people in non-mediated personal and group-based conversations, we also interact with other forms of media characters like in television, video games, films and social media. These experiences are ones that guide us to make our own identities and consciousness which include racial and ethnic identity. Although there are explicit discussions of race and ethnicity communicated via media channels, there are also implicit messages that are constructed and communicated to people building their identities (Behm-Morawitz, 2020).

A Critical Lens on The Big Bang Theory

The 'Mad-Scientist' Concept- The image of what one would call a "mad scientist" in television, films or dramas today have all been portrayed in stereotypical domains. Yet, one of the most successful television series has scientists as main leads or features them as central characters. Because of the many scientists having been portrayed in a stereotypical manner, our understanding of scientists lack clarity across platforms. This specific understanding can be found in the shift towards cultural depiction of nerds in the area of popular culture as well as in the analysis of comedy as a genre in television studies. The Big Bang Theory as a series as well as in its depiction of scientists has resonated with audiences when they look at the term "nerds" in popular culture. The characters portrayed on The Big Bang Theory are diverse with respect to their background, gender, ethnicity.

Scientists, being a historically bullied group according to many researchers, are constantly under the lensof fans and critics, as to whether or not they help create a positive or negative perception in the minds of the audience about science. Some critics argue that characters who portray scientists on a show receive a lot of backlash for the role they play and become victims of jokes by the audience. The show's writers and the producers however, have spared the central characters of TBBT the same ignominy. The attention and appreciation shown to the characters of the show by the writers is exemplary and portrays them as sympathetic and lovable characters. This portrayal contrasts with the 'mad scientist'image shown or displayed in other science based shows, successfully minimising the negativity of the said stereotype. The archetype of the 'mad scientist' had found its place in European Literature in the mid-nineteenth century and even in the Japanese 'mad scientist murder' detective fiction, much later. Mad scientists have been associated with nuclear power disasters and featured as stock characters in science fiction and horror stories. There have been occasions when scientists have been portrayed having mental breakdowns and having little control over their emotional status such as the Hollywood movie 'A Beautiful Mind' which celebrated a mathematical genius having crippling mental issues or the character of Professor Sturgis from the popular American sit-com 'Young Sheldon', suffering bouts of depression. Considerable research has looked at the depiction of science and scientists, and how fictionalized visions of scientists affect perceptions of science. The depictions of scientists in The Big Bang Theory fits into the stereotype of "nerd" or "geek". The term was first used in a Dr Seuss book in 1950 and in the Oxford dictionary the word "Geek'' corresponds to someone being "foolish, offensive or worthless" (WEITEKAMP, 2015).

Redefining 'Nerdy' -Televisual characterisation has been an emerging area of interest for linguists across many disciplines. Not just television, but many other narratives like films, dramas or novels have emerged into the mainstream characterisation by researchers. There is a need to understand the arguments that make up television characterisation and how they are different from other forms of characterisation. One distinct characteristic that comes up while characterising television characters is that audiences interact and engage with these characters on a regular basis and are extremely interested in the lives of these characters. Television programmes have the unique ability to become a part of a family or the topic of a household discussion. Media psychology, an important facet of psychology, has been known to identify various ways in which the audience interacts with characters in media and can form social and interpersonal relationships with them, especially television characters. Fans of these television series are known to have different forms of interaction and engagement with the series as well as with audiences as fans, part of a cult and many more. Looking at Sheldon from the popular television sitcom The Big Bang Theory, from semiotic practices

to the style that he endows in the series, one can identify him as a nerd/geek. Sheldon and the others form part of a subculture of nerds. On one hand, this series does have recourse to mainstream stereotypes but on the other hand, all the characters portrayed as nerds do have their own individuality and characteristics. Sheldon's character traits are reinforced in multiple ways. It is not just his language but also clothing, facial expressions and behaviour in general. Identities such as nerdiness are constructed through semiotic practices that include more than language but may also encompass hairstyles, clothes and accessories, activities, musical preferences and other values (BEDNAREK, 2014).

Methodology

The present study attempts to look at the different aspects of the popular American sitcom TBBT through Todorov's narratology lens. The narrative of a story or plot line often conveys great meaning. It takes forward the agenda of the writer or the film maker, or as in this case the producers of TBBT. Narrative theory is based on the premise and understanding that narratives or stories (around events/phenomenon/characters from popular culture) are a part of human strategy often used by people to reconcile themselves with life experiences- both good and bad. According to narrative theorists (Cebik, J. B. 1986), humans use narratives/stories to understand the world around them, the questions why, what, when and so on are linked to narratives. Therefore, the chief purpose of Narrative theory is to provide explanations to crucial events. In case of a comedic TV serial the narrative analysis will help in understanding what issues were discussed at length, the manner and approach of presenting the core idea, the reasons for the twists in the story line, the character portrayals and so on. The patterns that emerge from this narrative analysis will help in clearing our doubts and strengthening our understanding about TBBT-both the mass popularity and the intense dislike.

Research Objectives

1. To understand the purpose of a television sitcom – engaging audience or to take a narrative forward

2. To understand the extreme reactions/emotions that TBBT invited

Research Questions

1. Why do sitcoms restrict themselves to simplistic understanding of the world around?

2. Why was TBBT such a popular sitcom globally?

3. Why was there such extreme criticism of TBBT?

4. What were the general takeaways for the audience and content creators?

Theoretical Framework

Social Responsibility Theory was used by many developing countries and third world nations in the mid-20th century. Social responsibility theory of press is associated with "the Commission of the Freedom of Press" in the United States in 1949. Social responsibility theory does allow free press without any censorship but at the same time it is kept in mind that the content of press or media should be discussed in a public panel and media should accept any obligation from the regulation of the public or any form of professional regulations as well. This theory lies somewhere between both authoritarian theory and libertarian theory as it gives freedom to the media to communicate their messages but also allows the same for public purview. This theory allows everyone to say something or express their opinions about the media they are exposed to. It also allows community opinion, consumer action and professional ethics (Social Responsibility Theory, 2018). The social responsibility theory of mass media changed the way the press published news from objective reporting to interpretative reporting. When, before this theory, facts were presented without any interpretation, the audience perceived it the way they wanted it to. That affected social order. Under social responsibility theory, the press is taken to be meant for the people and the society. The media, according to this theory, becomes the place for the voiceless to find their voice, call and develop public opinions where every person has the right to speak and express his/her views to the community. This is considered as a tool for social development (Bajracharya, 2018).

The present study uses the social responsibility theory as a framework for a better understanding. This paper focuses on the social responsibility of the sitcom towards the public. A sitcom is generally considered as escapist content by most viewers. People watch a sitcom to distract themselves from all the stress that they go through on a daily basis. It is seen as a perfect form of 'voyeuristic stress reduction'. However, it also becomes the responsibility of a sitcom to fulfil certain responsibilities related to the issues portrayed in the concerned series. Through this theory, the researchers attempt to understand questions such as-what are the social issues that are brought to the forefront by the sit-com? Were the issues raised merely as an example of 'tokenism' or were they addressed throughout the season of the series in order to realise closure on the said topic? The people who watched The Big Bang Theory have mixed opinions regarding how the sitcom turned out over the years. The core understanding of the paper lies in the fact that a sitcom, widely watched by audiences globally did manage to garner a lot of views and popularity but at the same time was extensively critiqued for the issues that it brought about throughout the years. The debate between popularity and political correctness and whether either of them was fulfilled in its entirety is what would be brought out in this research using social responsibility theory as a framework to substantiate the same.

Analysis/Discussion

This research paper will use narrative analysis to analyse three major themes that were a part of The Big Bang Theory. The three themes are key to the analysis of the series as these were the ones that brought out criticism amongst many critics. The show was criticised for not dealing with important issues in its entirety. Even if certain societal issues were brought about through these series they were not explored to their full potential. The issues that will be of focus for this research paper are:

1. Intellectual Elitism
2. Wrongful representation of race
3. Gendered representations of characters

Intellectual Elitism

It is the belief or the notion that certain individuals possess certain intellectual qualities that are perceived to be highly intrinsic in nature and that it is the only thing that can do good to the society, constructively shaping the world, and therefore deserves influence and authority greater than that of others. This show, through its main characters, but majorly through Sheldon is seen as portraying his intellectual capacity in a manner that is elitist and holds supremacy over the other characters. This characteristic of Sheldon is evident throughout the seasons where he constantly feels the urge to establish himself as the intellectual monarch where he constantly belittles people of who they are and what they do. Looking back at the first episode, is where all of this begins when Sheldon and Leonard are seen going to a "high IQ sperm bank" where they see a woman doing a crossword puzzle. Leonard just goes ahead and finishes the crossword puzzle without the woman's consent. Albeit small, an indication to intellectual superiority is highlighted and given itself an introduction in this episode. In many of these cases, possessing an intellectual mindset is posited as being a 'nerd'. Raj's selective mutism becomes clear in the first episode as he is shown as not being able to talk to women. Howard is quick to establish Raj as a 'nerd' just because Raj is not able to talk to women or be comfortable amongst a group of women, unless he is inebriated. Sheldon and Leonard are characteristically shown as what nerds would do in social situations. They are constantly immersed in their 'intellectual discussion', and are shown as being weak to many other aspects of life. They are shown in one of the scenes as not being able to lift heavy boxes, not being able to strike a proper conversation with a girl, asking too many uncomfortable questions and so on. In one of the early episodes, Sheldon and Leonard are quick to be intimidated by Penny's ex-boyfriend. The ex-boyfriend is shown to be what society would construct someone as 'manly' (hugely built with big muscles and great height), strong enough to intimidate the 'boys'. In a similar situation, Penny is shown kissing a man who is endowed with the physical characteristics with the same stereotypical features of a 'manly' man, which intimidates Leonard. Leonard describes the man as 'dreamy' to his

friends. Other than being intimidated by the different men that Penny socialises with, Leonard also suffers from complexes. At one point where he is 'dating'(to be romantically associated) Penny, he feels she is not the right girl for him. According to Leonard, Penny is just a waitress which essentially is given to understand that Penny is lower in status when it comes to intellectual caliber. Leonard feels that Leslie Winkle, another scientist working in the same laboratory is better suited for him as she is on the same conventional 'nerd bandwagon'(group).

Sheldon is shown to regard himself so highly as a scientist and a human in general that he gets into trouble for the same. At the induction of their new boss, Sheldon keeps telling Leonard that the new boss is not qualified enough and while introducing himself, calls himself 'a real scientist' and eventually gets fired. Sheldon and Penny have their 'moments' where Sheldon gets the opportunity to assert his intellectual superiority over her. Penny is shown working as a waitress in a cheesecake factory and is an aspiring actress who intends to make a living out of her acting job but the only job that pays her is that of waitressing, the acting job does not yield any offers or money whatsoever. There could have been a much better and kinder portrayal of Penny, but she is shown as being 'dumb'(intellectualy empty) regularly accused, according to the 'boys' in the sit-com, of stealing their food as well as their Wi-Fi. The first few seasons do not do justice to her character and the character itself only starts developing later in the seasons to a more mature, calm and stable Penny and until then, quite some time is lost. Sheldon is seen almost in every episode, making fun of Penny. If Penny finds trouble in understanding something, Sheldon is quick to point that out as well. The demeaning nature of Sheldon towards Penny is constantly ignored and overlooked throughout the initial seasons and is never addressed in any of the episodes. All that happens while Sheldon continues to undermine Penny or anyone for that matter is the sound of canned(taped) laughter in the background and just one or two inadequate lines of dialogue from the person in question, trying to sustain whatever remaining decency there is left. Leonard wants to present a paper at a conference about which he finds out only while taking the trash out. Sheldon, being the co-author, finds the conference 'too dumb to even present a paper in' and forbids Leonard from presenting their paper. When Leonard still makes it to the conference, Sheldon interrupts him and says, "I don't need validations from lesser minds" referring to the other renowned physicists who have graced the conference as guests. Sheldon in one of the other episodes tries to exert his elitism when they prepare for a quiz at the laboratory. He demeans Howard when he says, "You do not even have a PhD" to which Howard does not say anything, but the viewer is intelligent enough to discern his distress. Sheldon due to his constant exertion of superiority is eventually removed from the team. Sheldon forms his own team and goes against Leonard, Leslie, Raj and Howard and is surprised when the janitor in his team answers the question and even though the answer is right, he does not accept

it. In a similar incident, Raj gets picked for an interview with People Magazine and Sheldon is not accepting of this fact but on the other hand, questions if there was even a jury or a peer review committee to judge the validity of the same. Similarly, Sheldon starts to address a class full of students but instead of encouraging them starts to demotivate and demean them into questioning their talents at making their mark at experimental physics.

It is not just Penny or Sheldon per se, although most of the scenes that portray intellectual elitism do stem from Sheldon's character. It is also other characters in the show that partake in scenes of the same. Time and time again, Howard gets picked because of the fact that he is just an engineer and not considering the fact that he graduated from MIT. Most of the ridicule comes from his friends and his wife, Bernadette, and comes from the fact that they all have a PhD and Howard does not. Even when Howard comes from outer space and keeps talking about his experience in space, he receives nothing but ridicule. Similarly, many a time even Raj as well as Leonard are made fun of, because of their profession . Sheldon even goes and makes fun of his then girlfriend and future wife Amy saying that neurobiology is not even a subject worth studying which upsets Amy. There is also a scene where Amy and Bernadette get into a fight defending their own boyfriend/husband talking about whose profession is better. With these many prevailing examples of forcing on intellectual superiority over one or the other characters, the show does manage to bring out laughter among the audience which in itself is problematic. The one character who feels strongly inferior because of the way the other characters treat him is Stuart. Stuart is the owner of the proud comic store that has been in the show forever. The sad part is the importance given to comic book store in the show; the same is not accorded to the owner. Stuart is constantly ridiculed by Sheldon, Leonard, Raj and Howard because of his intellectual stature. He is treated as the absolute replacement of Howard when he is in space and the same has been mentioned by Sheldon in the show.

Race as a Bone of Contention

Race has always been a topic of discussion while talking about sitcoms because sitcoms generally do not accord other races equal importance. The topic of race then becomes extremely sensitive and further attention is paid to see how it is handled on these shows. Wrongful representation of race is one of the many reasons that a sitcom fails to gather its bit of popularity that would have eventually come if the aspect of race was handled properly. TBBT also faced a lot of criticism from renowned critics on how race was handled in the series. There is blatant racism in the show and all of it is directed towards Raj, an Indian-American character among the friends. Raj hates his own Indian culture and is in love with the American way of doing things. Just because one does not like one's culture, it should not give a show the chance to ridicule the same. Let us begin with the fact that

while we look at the living room seating arrangement, we see Sheldon having his own sweet spot on the couch, Penny on the chair/couch, Howard, Bernadette and Amy, all of them sit on the couch and only Raj is the person who is made to sit down and there have been no episodes where all the characters are together that one can see Raj on the couch. The position that Raj is given to sit itself speaks volumes over how the show has decided to treat him and the culture as well. In many of the scenes, one can see Raj being completely left over alone in Sheldon and Leonard's apartment. In one of the episodes, when Sheldon's mother comes to visit, she has made dinner and she goes specifically to Raj and says, "This is chicken. I hope that isn't one of the animals you think is magic". India is NOT all about magic and shows need to understand that. Raj, Leonard and Howard talk about approaching a girl and the Indian stereotype comes up when Raj says, "It would be simpler in India. Five minutes with her dad, 20 goats and a laptop and we'd be done." Making an Indian say that about his own culture through his Indian character; things cannot get any poorer. In an episode where Raj gets involved with Penny, he says, after the incident, "As your friend, you might want to know that we didn't have sex in the conventional sense," to which Penny replies, "Oh God, did you pull some weird Indian crap on me?" In one of the episodes, Raj is called Apu, the Simpsons' Indian character, which is racist considering that the character of Apu from Simpsons was a character of colour and was critiqued for being a South Asian stereotype. A statement that was made for Raj that till date stays in mind. In an episode, Penny accidentally fires a paintball gun on Sheldon's spot on the couch. While Sheldon whines about not having his spot, Howard takes Raj's part of the couch and replaces it to which Sheldon says, "If your head had been accidentally amputated and we transplanted a dog's head in its place, would the problem be solved?" Raj is practically called a dog here, a statement which Raj realises but does nothing in the show. The severity of it is the fact that even in all of these above cases, Raj goes through humiliation that is either brought upon by his friends or by himself, he chooses to stay silent and not call out the systemic racism that is in place.

Gender Issues

The Big Bang Theory was also criticised for its handling of gender related issues. Penny, the bubbly neighbour of Sheldon and Leonard is presented as a 'dumb blonde' throughout most of the series' episodes, whose exaggerated sexuality is what matters and is often the 'butt' of most crude humour and cruel jokes. Penny is the one to bring about strange men into her house and have relationships with them. In one of the episodes when the guys are battling for their respective university position tenure(permanency), Penny is brought in to supposedly increase Leonard's chances of getting tenure by attending the meeting in a tight black mini dress with a 'push up bra', with the intent of using her body as a persuasion tool. In yet another situation, when Penny is out for dinner with Sheldon and

Amy, Sheldon asks Amy to count the number of men that Penny has been involved with and the number comes to be a big one which makes Penny extremely uncomfortable. In one of the episodes in a later season, Sheldon gets a female assistant to whom he says that she is not succeeding at her job because women are like an egg salad sandwich on a warm day: full of eggs and only appealing for a short time. The assistant does not revert to this but this in real life would be considered one of the many examples of workplace harassment. Sheldon keeps commenting on women's, especially Penny's menstrual cycle and attributes it to one of the major reasons for Penny's mood swings. Raj has crippling anxiety issues and he becomes selectively mute in front of women but once he has his drinking preferences sorted out, he starts making improper remarks to women and treats them asobjects of sex. While out with a woman, Raj starts to remove his clothes in front of the woman in public, embarrassing the woman a great deal. There is an extremely toxic form of sexism that is brought out by having Howard in the series but the whole thing has been portrayed as completely normal and something that happens almost everywhere. Until his marriage to his somewhat of a long-term girlfriend Bernadette, he has been shown as a pervert who would go to any extent to sleep with a woman. He consistently makes lewd remarks in front of women and mostly seen with Penny and Penny does nothing but cringe and ask him to leave. There is one scene that offers respite to the audience when Penny punches Howard in the face for his lewd remarks but as the episode progresses, one can see him getting back to his old, immature and perverted train of thought. Raj and Howard also spy on the house of models and eventually make it through to their house with the intention of sleeping with at least one of these women. Howard during this process tells Sheldon, "You know what? If it is creepy to use the Internet, military satellites, and robot aircraft to find a house full of gorgeous young models so that I can drop in on them unexpectedly, then fine, I am creepy." Both Amy and Bernadette are equally smart as their male counterparts but they are only used in the show for their character to be ridiculed and their jobs to be made fun of. In her article "Representations of Female Scientists in The Big Bang Theory," Heather Mcintosh argues that Amy's and Bernadette's careers are attractive on the surface to viewers and to their boyfriends, but their professional lives are diminished in worth when compared to how often their feminine roles and duties take over the storyline (Buter, n.d.). Raj's gender has also been some sort of a question mark throughout the series. Raj has called himself 'metrosexual' which means a heterosexual urban man who enjoys shopping, fashion, and similar interests traditionally associated with women or gay men. Raj is shown to have established a fondness towards Howard that is borderline romantic. In the beginning of the seasons, everyone comes to know that Raj had kissed a guy and Raj eventually is ridiculed for it. Raj in one of the episodes does outrightly speak about his inability to speak with women or effeminate men which in itself is an exploration of his gender.

Conclusion

The Big Bang Theory has had its successful run for over 12 seasons, with the audience loving each and every character and relating with them at almost all times. Many were extremely sad to watch it end its journey after 12 big years of success, laughter, awards and laurels. At the same time, the show has received flak for its writing, production, portrayal of characters and so much more. The characters were loved immensely by fans, but there have been problems that even loyal fans cannot dismiss easily, that the series carried forward. Some of the problems that have been articulated in this research paper are the concept of intellectual elitism or intellectual superiority, wrongful representation of race and gendered representations in the series that spun to almost 20 episodes per season.

The show did have a considerable amount of intellectual elitism portrayed via its characters, mainly through the portrayal of Sheldon Cooper. Sheldon who calls himself Stephen Hawking's "Intellectual Equal" behaves as if he is the one who has no competition, at least in this time and space. Sheldon is shown as exerting intellectual superiority over people and sometimes going forward to the extent of insulting people, their professions as well as their identity. Sheldon thinks that being a theoretical physicist is understanding the norms of how the universe works and therefore he possesses the knowledge of everything that comes well and good under the universe. Apart from Sheldon, there are other characters as well who at some point or the other have shown to be intellectually elitist in their behaviour.

The Indian race as well as the Indian culture has been wrongfully portrayed throughout the series with several examples being blatantly shown in this regard. Raj has strict conventional parents who do not want him to "hook up"(socialize) with any American girl and would only want him to settle down with an Indian girl. Conventionalism does exist in some parts of India but that is not what India is known for. Making fun of Indian culture is a common thread throughout the series.

Gendered representations have been a problem with the series, where women were just used not for their smart brains but the body that they possessed, they were made fun of, they were ridiculed about the jobs they do and are constantly being talked to in a demeaning and vulgar way and all of it is thought to be okay. All of the things that were wrong with the series were backed by audience laughter, be it live or be it pre-recorded(canned) laughter and that is where the problem lies. Not only were the problems in the series not properly dealt with, they were also thought to be objects of fun and frolic in a sitcom which goes on to talk about gaining a second perspective on what the sitcom actually tried to achieve. Deconstructing the series and looking at it from many different angles has become necessary to see what the critics have argued about. The sitcom needs

to be given a hard look in terms of it dealing with sensitive issues and not just look at the funny aspects. The Big Bang Theory in the final analysis succumbed to what is popularly termed as 'playing to the gallery', meaning that commercial interests and end gain held sway over taking a stand and political correctness.

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