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ENG 240-001

25 September 2015

The Invisible Minorities Among Us

At first glance, ABC's "Fresh Off the Boat" isn't doing anything innovative regarding camera handling techniques nor is it turning *mise-en-scène* on its head. It's not even the first TV series with an Asian protagonist to be aired on national television in America. Simply, it is a **sitcom** occupying a prime time spot on Tuesday nights that focuses on the adolescence of Eddie Huang, a former law firm associate turned drug dealer, and now celebrity chef, whose cultural identity is repeatedly threatened with change and ostracism when his cultural roots are literally weeded out after his family moves from Washington D.C. to Orlando, Florida in the mid-nineties. It is all too easy to overlook this television series based on how incomprehensible *their* culture is to an *American's*, and the amount of utilized Asian stereotypes can be a bit off-putting initially. However, when closely-examining the emotional undercurrents of the show, "Fresh Off the Boat" possesses a darker motive in which it rebels against employing stock, submissive Asian characters and addresses the ultimate invisible minority: a woman. The overall effect is a popular television series that is culturally liberating all while playing nice with TV executives. In Arthur Chu's 2015 article for *Salon*, "Eddie Huang is our Richard Pryor: "Fresh Off the Boat" and TV history in the making," Chu remarks how this still-fresh TV show does more than entertain a mostly white audience with its larger than life characters and its countless overt references to American pop culture. "Fresh Off the Boat" is a violent and unapologetic exhibition of the TV industry's historical inability to initiate the cessation of employing worn-out

stereotypes and bigotry-promoting tropes for the sake of comfort and ratings. It is until the creation of “Fresh Off the Boat” that audiences really see what lack of coverage has been given regarding gender, race, and social issues, that in most cases are simply glossed over in both TV and literary studies.

Chu reveals that Asian-Americans have been considered to be the invisible minority of American culture and “have mostly been fighting to have any portrayals in the media at all.” However, it takes more than just a fad of diversity TV and the novelty of an Asian’s Asian-ness to make this particular TV show different from past attempts like Margaret Cho’s “All-American Girl” and “Mr. T and Tina” from the seventies. So how does “Fresh Off the Boat” manage to make waves in diversifying television while seemingly feeding viewers traditional stereotypes of the Asian family?

First off, “Fresh Off the Boat” is backed by non-fiction (Eddie Huang’s memoir) and a team of writers who cleverly diminish Asian stereotypes by painting a juxtapositional portrait of the two cultures that satirizes the blandness of American culture despite how diverse the American population seems through the usage of **POV** and **irony** in the pilot episode.

The thought process and **POV** of TV Eddie is illustrated by the voice-over narration of the real Eddie Huang. By having the real Eddie deliver the narration, it is a new method of breaking down the fourth wall in television and film, blurring the boundaries of what is fiction and non-fiction. Agency is established and validated, and viewers quickly find themselves immersing into the world of little Eddie. The voice-over by the bonafide writer is a powerful tool that invites the audience to empathize with the character while slowly delivering **realism** through the realization that Eddie is just like any other person out there. He feels pain, apathy, and

loneliness like the viewer. Eventually, the layers of stereotypes are shed off and Eddie is no longer seen as an object, an Asian, but as a person.

The **tone** of the narration is vulgar and uncompromising as Eddie attempts to fit into his new school and neighborhood yet his social and cultural upbringing restrain him from successfully meeting those goals no matter how relatable he is much like the character, Daisy, from Henry James' *Daisy Miller: A Study*. Daisy Miller constantly flaunts her wealth and amiableness, which surpasses those around her, but is never accepted by the community. She is rebuked and spurned for her new money by those possessing old money, and eventually fades away never gaining any acceptance other than Mr. Winterbourne's. Though Eddie is spared from Daisy's demise, his American-ness is stripped away because he simply looks Asian to society. To other ethnic groups he is considered an "other" to be repressed by other repressed minorities such as when he is referred to as a "chink" by a schoolmate.

It is difficult to disagree with Chu's statements about how "Fresh Off the Boat" is making TV history regarding racism, but it does nothing to address the genius of the writing behind Eddie Huang's mother, Jessica. Beginning in the very first episode, although assuming the overly done TV Asian accent and tiger mom stereotype, the show's writers have formulated a character of amazing depth. Jessica is by no means an Asian doll, but is a woman who can effectively deliver a dose of **satire**, social awareness, and whip-like intellect via passive-aggression witnessed during a brief thirty-second exchange between Jessica and the Stepford Wives of suburban Orlando. With a grimace and a simple question of, "Are you all related?" to those neighbors, the show's writers use Jessica as a vessel to make the statement of how indistinctive American culture can appear to other cultures. This moment defines her as a **modern woman**, if not a modern Asian woman on television, who can hold her own. The many literary pieces with

storylines overlooking the female's perspective and ability to be portrayed as an able and single individual like Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*, is washed away in "Fresh Off the Boat" by making fun of American culture as well as Asian-American culture.

Like its title, "Fresh Off the Boat" rebels and refuses to assimilate to the archaic portrayals of Asians in film and television. It can be argued that many of the jokes and the delivery of the Huangs on TV would perhaps promote the lifespan of Asian stereotypes in television. Superficially, this is true, but past all the accents and clichés, the viewer will witness many nuanced gestures and carefully-written dialogue interwoven into this TV show. Towards the end of Chu's article, he notes, "– the network TV show that's most boldly and unapologetically about racism and racial conflict is the one with an Asian cast." "Fresh Off the Boat" teaches viewers an important lesson in how stereotypes and tropes can be broken even if it means operating under the façade of appearing racist.

Works Cited

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