

Mahatma Gandhi: racism's latest target



RAOUL JUNEJA

Imagine flipping through one of the most popular U.S. men's magazines and finding colourful images of an old religious Jew being savagely beaten by a muscular neo-Nazi, amidst a commentary saturated with racial hatred for Jews. Or watching a rave American TV show and discovering a minstrel cartoon character spouting "yes, massa" lines.

Considering the vast consumption of U.S. entertainment media in this country, you'd have reason to be concerned about the effect of such racism on the multicultural fabric of Canada.

Now substitute a South Asian victim in these two cases and you'll see what has become the current rage in popular prejudice. After years of humiliating people of African, Asian, and even Native cultures, the American entertainment behav-

ior has turned on us.

Exhibit A is a so-called "workout" routine featured in the February issue of Maxim Magazine titled "Hin-don't." Over three shocking pages, none other than Mahatma Gandhi is shown as the object of attack. At the end of a beating, too horrific to describe, Gandhi is depicted crying in a corner of a shoe closet addressing his white attacker as "Sir."

Exhibit B is a stereotypical South Asian character known as "Apu," courtesy of *The Simpsons*. For over a decade, this show has steadily reinforced prejudices of accented South Asians working at convenience stores using "Thank you, come again" catch phrases before going home to elephant statues and arranged marriages.

Mind you, in Maxim's case, social responsibility is the last thing to expect from a publication that earns its cash by marketing undressed women from the entertainment world for profit. But how can even the most ignorant writer, editor, or publisher not realize the damage that such a hateful depiction of South Asians inflicts on the psyches of their worldwide youth readership, not to men-

tion the general public? Are they really convinced that even one Caucasian student from their huge high school and college market won't subconsciously remember these images the next time he becomes upset at a person of Indian or Pakistani heritage?

Or imagine a white *Simpsons* fan who has watched and ridiculed the Apu character daily over the show's 12-year history, but never had the chance to spend anywhere close to that amount of time with a person of Indian or Pakistani descent to actually understand their culture. If the white student gets upset at a person of South Asian heritage in school or at college, couldn't the lines between fantasy stereotypes and real prejudice be blurred?

Or if witnessing racial slurs directed at a person of Indian or Pakistani descent, might the Caucasian student shy away from defending the victim after getting so accustomed to similar "jokes" from *The Simpsons*?

Notwithstanding an occasional South Asian-funded production focused on positive depiction of the performers, it'd actually be quite hard to find an Ameri-

can entertainer of Indian or Pakistani heritage who hasn't been forced to literally "brown-face" in order to work, especially during the past year, overemphasizing both cultural clothing and accents, simply to accept terrorist roles or appear in music videos singing from the back seat of their parents' taxi.

So what can be done? Personal perception is probably the best start. Instead of automatically supporting the constant flow of products from the American entertainment system, listen to the messages being presented and envision how they would sit amidst our country's alternative multicultural media. If you don't like it, don't buy it.

If anything is to be learned from the history of Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King, or Nelson Mandela's leadership in South Africa, it's that the struggle to end racism has been the common bond between minorities across the globe. As Canadians, let's keep it that way.

Raoul Juneja, known as DeeJay Ra, is a hip-hop performer at radio station CHRW.