

Historic Emmy Winner Riz Ahmed Shouts Out South Asian Youth Action & Innocence Project

by *Pavani Yalamanchili*
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Riz Ahmed used his historic Emmy moment to bring attention to Islamophobia and injustice in the justice system. He won the Emmy award for Outstanding Lead Actor in a Limited Series or Movie, becoming the first Muslim man and first South Asian man to win an Emmy for acting. The nomination was for his work on HBO's critically acclaimed crime drama *Night Of*, playing the role of Nasir "Naz" Khan, a Pakistani American college student from Queens, NY. In his acceptance speech, Ahmed thanked two organizations:

It's always strange reaping the rewards of a story that's based on real-world suffering, but if this show has shone a light on some of the prejudice in our society — Islamophobia, some of the injustice in our justice system, then maybe that's something. And I'll shout out South Asian Youth Action for helping me prepare for this, and the Innocence Project.

The first group he thanked was South Asian Youth Action ([SAYA](#)), an organization based in Queens, NY. Started in 1996, SAYA has a mission to "foster a strong sense of belonging in youth and provide them with tools to thrive academically, professionally and personally." In this video, young people involved with the group talk about what SAYA means to them: Ahmed also thanked [Innocence Project](#), which was founded in 1992 by Peter Neufeld and Barry Scheck at Cardozo School of Law, and works on criminal justice reform and exonerating the wrongly convicted. Watch [this video](#) for the stories of four men represented by the Innocence Project and freed from wrongful convictions.

At Riz Ahmed's [backstage interview](#) at the Emmys, replying to questions from BBC's [Shefali Kulkarni](#) and BuzzFeed's [Susan Cheng](#), he talked about diversity, roles for actors of color and the "systemic" problem of inclusion. He has publicly discussed

these topics before, in a [speech on diversity](#) at the U.K. House of Commons, and in an essay about being [typecast](#) in airports and in acting, featured in Nikesh Shukla's *The Good Immigrant*.

Speaking about U.K.-U.S. differences backstage, Ahmed said “actors of color often have more opportunities in the U.S.” For more on this topic and how period dramas in the U.K. may play a part in British actors of color heading to work in the U.S., check out Aina Khan's article at [The Independent](#).

When BuzzFeed's Cheng told him that he was the second Asian to ever receive an Emmy for acting, Ahmed asked her who was the first. He appeared pleased to learn it was fellow Brit [Archie Panjabi](#). Panjabi won the 2010 Emmy for Outstanding Supporting Actress in a Drama Series for the role of Kalinda Sharma on legal drama *Good Wife*.

Lena Waithe & Donald Glover Make Emmy History

Lena Waithe and Aziz Ansari won the Emmy category of Outstanding Writing for a Comedy Series for their work on the *Master of None* Season 2 “Thanksgiving” episode. Waithe is the first-ever African American woman to be nominated, and to win, in this category. Ansari gracefully stood by Waithe's side in silence, visibly affected by her words, as she delivered an acceptance speech with an important message for LGBTQIA family and fans of the episode:

I see each and every one of you... The things that make us different — those are our superpowers. Every day when you walk out the door and put on your imaginary cape and go out there and conquer the world, because the world would not be as beautiful as it is if we weren't in it. And for everybody out there that showed us so much love for this episode, thank you for embracing a little Indian boy from South Carolina and a queer black girl from the South Side of Chicago.

In “Thanksgiving,” Waithe and Ansari are childhood friends Denise and Dev, who grow up sharing the holiday at Denise's home over the years. The story focuses on Denise coming out as a lesbian to her mother, based on Waithe's own coming out story. The characters also talk about race, including discussion of O.J. Simpson, [Sandra Bland](#), and [Sureshbhai Patel](#).

Master of None co-creators Ansari and Alan Wang won the [2016 Emmy](#) in this same category of comedy writing for their work on the first season's “Parents,” another episode highlighting family members. Ansari's work on *Master of None* received additional nominations this year, for Outstanding Comedy Series (a category that went to *Veep*) and for Outstanding Lead Actor in a Comedy Series. The latter category's Emmy went to *Atlanta*'s Donald Glover.

In a historic win providing one of his two 2017 Emmy awards, Glover became the first African American to win Outstanding Directing in a Comedy Series. In his [acceptance speech](#), he highlighted his best friend filmmaker Hiro Murai, who directed six episodes of *Atlanta*. He also said:

I'm so glad that Lena won tonight and we're allowed to express ourselves the way that we want.
See the [full list](#) of 2017's Emmy nominees and winners online.

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