Whether it is a story from 20 years ago or a story from today, the tendency of a person to focus on the disparity rather than similarities between people makes self-expression for any idiosyncratic person challenging and frightening. Various normative discourses provided by television, film, music, fashion and the internet, are well equipped with simultaneously teaching and reinforcing notions that further divide the acceptable from the unacceptable. The word queer primarily means odd, eccentric or weird. Not surprisingly, it was used as a derogatory term for anybody who didn’t fit into the clean-cut groups of gender identity or sexual orientation in a heteronomous society. But since then the LGBTQ+ community has flipped the word around to use it with a sense of pride with the help of media.

Media is of extreme importance in the movement of gay and lesbian representational politics and identity because it is capable of expressing the possibilities as well as the limitations of the liberal acceptance among the viewers who consider the LGBTQ+ community as the other. According to John Hartley in Uses of Television, television is a “teacher in the best sense” (Hartley, 1998). I believe that Hartley’s words hold water when talking about any media platform since it is the primary way in which one views, acknowledges and understands differences among our communities. These lessons do not necessarily mean schooling, rather they stand for the ‘anthropological’ sense of the word, since it allows us to cohere as a society. As Hartley points out media is influential in a way that other ways of learning may not be. It can explore “the way different populations with no necessary mutual affinity produce and maintain knowledge about each other, communicate with each other, (and) stay in touch” (Hartley, 1998). It is undeniable that media has importance among the marginalised, may it be on the basis of race, gender or sexual orientation, allowing them to participate freely in the media-sphere.

Our past experiences are best described by Jennifer Reed in her work The Three Phases of Ellen: From Queer To Gay To Postgay. (Reed, Chp. 1, 2007) She uses three distinct characterisations to represent the journey of the popular American talkshow host and comedian - Ellen DeGeneres - from her being closeted to being openly and publicly gay. And these three perspectives namely, pregay, gay and postgay, fit the timeline of alterations of the queer identity in popular culture and explain them quite well. So through her work Jennifer Reed has simplified and abridged the creation and re-creation of queer identities in the past 30 years.

Ellen DeGeneres has been the focus of Reed’s work since Ellen made television history by coming out in 1997. Prior to her disclosing her sexual orientation before the world, Ellen DeGeneres played the lead character of Ellen Morgan on a sitcom named ‘Ellen,’ who was for the majority of the seasons a character without a sexual identity. The show began to drop hints that the character Ellen Morgan might be gay in the later seasons of the show. The excitement that followed was inseparable from the rumour that Ellen DeGeneres might herself be a lesbian. Nevertheless, DeGeneres never uttered the word lesbian. Thus her and her characters’ identity did

---

1 Heteronomous can be defined as ‘subject to another’s laws and rules,’ according to the Collins Dictionary. It is a derivation of the word ‘heteronomy’ and hence, refers to the dependent nature of human society and the existence of implicit norms. ‘Heteronomous’ differs from the words heterogenous, heteronormative and heterosexual.
not conform to the heteronomous laws laid down by society. They remained undefined but they opened up non-straight positions.

As Reed said it herself, “operating in the liminal spaces of straight society this way created a ‘queer discourse’”. As defined by Alexander Doty in Making Things Perfectly Queer: Interpreting Mass Culture, queerness “is a quality relating to any expression that can be marked as contra or non-straight.” (Doty, 1993) Simply meaning that to be queer stood for standing outside any particular category. This was what Reed meant by the pregay or queer phase. A lot of the media representation during this time only dabbled in hinting at characters being members of the LGBTQ+ community, their identity remaining obscure and queer.

This progressed into the gay phase marked by Ellen and her character explicitly stating they are gay, which unarguably was the most crucial part in Jennifer Reeds fascinating theory. It was the part of the show which then had to deal with the fact that Ellen was now a lesbian. Her coming out was a momentous step in her journey, which labelled her as a “heterosexual-in-transition for the whole world to witness” (Dolan, 1993). This laid down the importance of explicitly claiming one’s identity and recognising them on screen. This action worked in favour of the marginalised community by helping it to restore its dignity and also create diverse characters in the public sphere. By declaring herself a part of the long-shamed lesbian identity, Ellen asserted her power and declared her resistance towards the hegemony of heterosexuality. Similarly, the slogan ‘Gay Pride’ stands against shame of homosexuality used to maintain this hegemonic power.

Ellen’s coming out had a lot of implications. It marginalised her on her own show making her the ‘other.’ No matter how sympathetic, and open-minded the other characters were, they now remained as a reference point for normal. By large, they reflected the sentiments of the majority of the audience. As a result the audience now viewed her as an outsider.

Since media is consumed by the whole population, there is no scope of alienating a part of the audience. Therefore, this phase had to deal with the overwhelming tension of having to portray a lesbian in a heterosexist society. ‘Coming out being an othering process, the perplexing task for Ellen was to represent lesbian life in such a manner that wouldn’t keep her in the ‘othered’ position.’

As best described by Reed, Ellen was ‘up against the straight mind.’ Throughout the episodes after Ellen came out, the content seemed to focus on denaturalising heterosexuality. “The foregrounding of heterosexuality not as a natural state of being but as a social institution” was a “radical movement in mainstream media” (Reed, 2007, pp.13). For the Feminist writer Monique Wittig, this is what she calls the ‘heterosexual contract.’ In her essay she wrote: “For to live in society is to live in heterosexuality.” (Wittig, 1992) Wittig thus voiced that the power of heterosexuality laid in its invisible and unquestioned normativity.

The claiming of identity in the previous stage was an awakening to the differences between those belonging to the queer community and those not. Contrastingly, the postgay phase focused on normalising the queer community in the heteronomous setup. Ellen was cancelled at the end of the first full season after Ellen came out as lesbian, but its value in the Queer movement could not be underplayed. Years later, after the failure of another sitcom with Ellen playing the lead, The Ellen DeGeneres Show came into existence, both marking the beginning of the postgay period. It was almost like saying, ‘I’m gay, but it doesn’t matter.’ This phase didn’t wish to further challenge the dominant cultural ideologies as that was already conquered via coming out in the gay stage.
The postgay stage rather shed focus on the assimilation of the LGBTQ+ community into the heteronomous society. This in no way means going back into the closet, but more so that the journey outside the closet outside isn’t a big deal.

Coming out on a public platform made everyone’s focus turn to Ellen and what makes her stand out; an isolated figure representing the whole queer community. Now she wished to coexist and blend in rather than stand out in a crowd. Normalising the LGBTQ+ populace could have also possibly had a positive effect on the liberal straight audience because they would now get the ‘satisfaction of knowing they are open-minded and accepting of the LGBTQ+ community without actually having to deal with the real differences that their identity could present’ (Reed, 2007).

Drawing from the three phases specified by Reed, we are living in the revolutionised postgay era. In this era too, as Thomas Peele, the editor of the book Queer Popular Culture describes it, queer culture is limited by acceptance. He posits that popular sitcoms such as F.R.I.E.N.D.S. demonstrated this stance. The lesbian character’s (Ross, a main character’s ex-wife) homoerotic desires are never painted in a serious light and are presented as a result of failed masculine sexuality on Ross’ part. It also promoted stereotypes (the mythic-mannish lesbian), like many other media pieces that view homosexuality as acceptable but not desirable. Luckily, a change in temperament has led to the development of films and shows such as Love Simon, Call Me By Your Name and Queer Eye that do not seek heterosexual acceptance but simply paint homosexuality as appealing and attractive.

However, we need to advance further from the postgay phase to a stage where every individual is recognised without any preconceived notions or biases and is represented solely for what they are and not tainted by any assumptions or prejudices. Hopefully we will be able to overcome all the difficulties faced while representing the queer community in popular culture by the next phase. It would then be a time for jubilation since our social contract would then be transformed into a non heterosexual contract, where one’s citizenship to society would not be governed by discrepancies in gender, race, caste or sexual orientation. It would be the utopia we all wish to achieve. And we’ll get there only when we move beyond ‘hetero.’

The identification and representation of the queer community in Indian media has also evolved over the past two decades. From the stereotypical flamboyant, eccentric and flimsy characters of Rishi Kapoor in Student Of The Year and Abhishek Bachchan’s in Bol Bachchan, indirectly titled as ‘clowns’ and used as a source of humour to ridicule the queer community, to the strong, gay protagonist Karan Mehra in Made In Heaven and a strong transgender women in Sacred Games - the change is conspicuous. The later protagonists are a more apposite and less stereotyped representation of the LGBTQ+ community, a clear indication of progress. However it also raises the question: Is any representation better than no representation?

The implication of any representation could be misrepresentation, similar to the fashion of painting the queer populace as lurid and jazzy so that they would stand out as the ‘other’. Rishi Kapoor and Abhishek Bachchan’s characters could not be identified as queer if it wasn’t for their flamboyance since they never explicitly come out as gay. Therefore colourful clothing, delicate personalities and a ‘feminine’ rather than a ‘masculine’ approach to the way they behave are used as indicators to bring out their queerness, and hence promote stereotypes. Fortunately, less multimedia pieces are aiming to fit the LGBTQ+ community into a single, identifiable jar and are giving such characters a scope to explore their own diverse and beautiful personalities. Karan Mehra is just one such example. He does not blend in with all other homosexual characters in Made In Heaven solely due to his membership to the queer community, because he now has the freedom to be an individual with a unique constitution of his own.

References


