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Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/ejas/22629>

ISSN: 1991-9336

Publisher

European Association for American Studies

Electronic reference

Ankita Dolai, "Beyond the Male Stereotype: Complicating Female Geek and Nerd Figures in Contemporary US Comedy Series", *European journal of American studies* [Online], 19-3 | 2024, Online since 07 September 2024, connection on 17 September 2024. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/ejas/22629>

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Beyond the Male Stereotype: Complicating Female Geek and Nerd Figures in Contemporary US Comedy Series

Ankita Dolai

1. Introduction

- 1 There have been various definitions of geeks and nerds which describe their personalities and interests as well as people's perception and treatment of them. The *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED) "defines 'nerd' as 'an insignificant, foolish, or socially inept person; a person who is boringly conventional or studious'" (qtd. in Lane 2). Leslie Simon further defines a nerd as a person who excels academically and who thrives on educationally induced pastimes (7). A geek, in turn, is described as an unsociable person who is wildly and obsessively passionate about and devoted to an activity, interest, or scientific field and strives to be an expert in it (Simon 3). Both nerds and geeks are thus generally considered outsiders because of their perceived lack of social skills, which does not enable them to ingratiate themselves with mainstream society. A dominant televisual imagining of what Quail calls the "hip/square dialectic" is the unfriendly, competitive antagonism between the nerd and the "jock" or "cool kid" (462). The image of the nerd, the butt of jokes that may escalate to psychological violence, yet typically maintaining the moral high ground, is mostly ascribed to cultural outcasts, hence leading to differentiation and exclusion from the normative society (Quail 462). This image serves to construct both halves of the hip/square dialectic in which, without its counterpart, each loses its meaning (Quail 462).
- 2 Televisual nerds and geeks mostly used to be constructed, assumed, and shown as white and male. They constantly strive to become cool and popular, representing the inherent desire to be a part of dominant and hegemonic heterosexual masculinity,

frequently establishing and strengthening a dichotomy with further subordinate constructs such as female, black, and/or gay nerds. While men can be geeks and still operate within the masculine context of modern society, “women often face contention between femininity and their geek identity, as they are normatively emphasized for either their bodies or intelligence” (Rocha 194). Such characteristics and tropes of autonomy, genius, intellect, technological prowess, and brilliant efficiency have been identified as desirable masculine traits in twentieth-century versions of American masculinity, especially (Lane 3). In this need to fit into an aspirational kind of masculinity, women nerds and geeks are further marginalized. Whereas geekiness and nerdiness have long been a source to subordinate and discriminate against women, such depictions have significantly changed in that geeks and nerds are no longer simply the butt of jokes or minor characters which are only present to elevate the image of the central protagonist.

- 3 The series discussed in the article instead use comedy in a significant way, either to laugh at something or laugh with someone. Humor, always ambivalent, thus can act as an instrument of resistance to as well as reinforcement of stereotypes. Humor acts as a counter-discourse when situated in ambivalence, producing resistance and highlighting inconsistencies and contradictions within dominant discourse (Krefting 2). In *Brooklyn 99* humor becomes such a counter-discourse, where the comedy is used not at the expense of existing stereotypes of geeks and nerds to create a hierarchy or fixate their ever-changing positionalities and identities. *Never Have I Ever*, in turn, uses humor based on stereotypes and tropes and highly exaggerates it, thus highlighting their ridiculousness.
- 4 Therefore, female nerds have created a space of their own, fostering a community of geeky women who do not have to conceal their femininity to be considered brilliant. A character such as Devi Vishwakumar uses her geekiness and nerdiness to carve out her own sense of self as she is constantly navigating her multi-layered identities in an Indian American diasporic space. Similarly, Amy Santiago facilitates more progressive and diverse representations of Latin American characters who define themselves through their personalities and individuality rather than stereotyped cultural roots and standardized popular culture representations of sexualized Latinas on screen. The telenovela *Betty en NY*, which will be explored briefly in contrast to these shows, draws parallels and delves deeper into Latin American nerd representations. Betty provides both a basis and a mirror to the kind of standard tropes and (stereo)typical humor that revolve around Latin sexuality and geekiness as well as its departure from such typified images. Amy and Devi’s nerdiness and geekiness, in turn, are depicted as empowering. Instead of being one-dimensional, boring, dull characters, both emerge as fully fleshed out characters with many different elements to their nerdiness, subverting societal standards and expectations of how a woman should behave. Therefore, the female geek is not only breaking with stereotypes of geeks but also of women and, thus, embodying a double empowerment.

2. Beatriz Rincón: An Independent yet Contradictory Nerd

- 5 Betty (Beatriz) Aurora Rincón Lozano from the American telenovela *Betty en New York* is an American professional of Mexican descent and also a young nerd.¹ Betty is highly

intelligent and smart, academically proficient and diligent, but also gullible and naïve, wears glasses and braces, has curly hair, a poor fashion sense, and is therefore deemed undesirable and ugly. Betty has been bullied since her childhood because she is not attractive enough, therefore she also lacks assertiveness. She aims to fulfil the American Dream by studying rigorously and working hard so that her parents can have a better life, which therefore transforms her into a nerd. Her nerdiness emerges from her perpetual striving to always be hardworking and studious so as to get a decent job. There is also a striking class difference between Betty's family and the male protagonist Armando's family. Betty's best friend Nicolas and her family are all rendered as unsophisticated and inelegant, associating being "ugly" and nerdy with belonging to a lower economic class. Hence, class, taste and beauty are connected to each other, establishing a social hierarchy.

- 6 In the very first episode, Betty becomes an assistant at a fashion company, which is way below her qualifications. Here, it becomes clear that Betty exists in opposition to dominant Eurocentric beauty standards; she is always made fun of, bullied and humiliated by the high ranking and "beautiful" employees. Her office is positioned in the storage room, symbolizing that female geeks will never fit standard femininity and hence, are othered and marginalized. Betty receives acceptance and companionship solely from other assistants, who are all women, are also regarded as unfashionable and belong to the lowest level in the office hierarchy, mirroring their lower economic class.
- 7 One of the important features of telenovelas is exaggerated, gratuitous humor that aims to reduce the harshness of restrictive societal views of nerds and, at the same time, exemplifies their difference. Even the dramatic aspects of *Betty* also become humorous because of their overstatement, like Armando's accident in the series finale to ultimately unite the main protagonists of the series (S1E123).² Most of the show's humor arises at the cost of Betty's unsuitable nerdy and "ugly" status in the fashion company. The constant rudeness and humiliation thrown at her, combined with her naiveté and childlike innocence, make her—the nerdy Latina—the object of jokes. Here, humor is used to propel the distinctions between nerdiness and mainstream society. Betty's hardworking nature and remarkable knowledge about the business aspect of the company are overlooked because of her "ugliness." Only her unattractiveness is highlighted and always made fun off.
- 8 Jokes are also made at the expense of some of the "beautiful" women for being dim-witted and shallow. In this regard, Betty, as the geeky girl, is recurrently established as antithetical to the pretty and popular Marcela and Patricia who, however, are also ignorant, conniving and mean. Overstated jokes played on both kinds of women can be viewed as a way of satirizing both, the very basis of such confined, one-dimensional beauty standards and the banishment of nerds from the norm. Such heightened humor points out the ruptures and absurdity of standardized norms associated with beauty and geekiness. Humor definitely highlights the foolishness and exaggeration behind such normative ways of viewing women, but at the same time, it affirms the norm that "smart" and "beautiful" do go together and reprimands nerdy women. The humor does not project acceptance but rather propels differences by making fun of their lack of femininity. The viewers ultimately root for Betty because of the obstacles, humiliation and exclusion she faces while still working extremely hard with dedication, honesty and kindness. Betty, however, ultimately goes through a makeover that aligns her with a traditional and normative understanding of being beautiful. Betty thus creates

relatability, yet her struggle with her nerdiness does not provide a positive portrayal and space for acceptance, nor a celebration of nerd identity.

- 9 Betty's clothing emphasizes traditional ways of asserting geek and nerd femininity and sexuality. Her clothing is scruffy and sexually unattractive as marketed by the show, typically consisting of a baggy skirt, dark tights, solid colorful sleeved tops and shirts, and mismatched oversized sweaters. This kind of clothing exaggerates the typical nerd figure that is being circulated but at the same time, instead of empowering Betty to accept her nerd clothes, she is made fun of because she is naïve and unfamiliar with clothing that is conventionally portrayed as mainstream fashionable. To emphasize her nerdiness and intelligence, her body and sexual desires are dismissed and considered unappealing. Girls learn early that society holds negative attitudes toward smart girls and judges them more harshly than smart boys (Innes 5). While driven, intelligent female characters have begun to appear more frequently on shows and films, they are still perceived as outside the norm, neither fitting masculine-connotated intellectualism nor being accepted by the mainstream. According to Burger, these representations, or lack thereof, speak to a cultural anxiety about intelligent women (214). Neterer further adds,

In texts created by outsiders to geek culture, geeks and nerds exist in a paradox. They are characterized by their otherness when compared to those in mainstream culture, and at the same time long to be a part of that culture themselves. Ultimately, outsider narratives have one goal: to normalize the nerd. Traditionally, geek characters are marked as undesirable and even dangerous because they exist outside of the accepted social paradigm. In order to reach a wider audience, these texts must make their geek and nerd characters accessible to those outside of the geek and nerd subculture, typically by bringing them further in line with mainstream culture. (115)

- 10 *Betty in New York's* makeover paradigm acts as a way of erasing the nerd image outwardly in that her nerdiness and difference in terms of clothing and beauty standards are transformed to fit idealized and normative femininity. This does not necessarily translate to taming her intelligence, however. Rather, it is the stereotypical physical determinants of nerdiness that are curbed. Betty's nerdiness at the end saves the company from going bankrupt, but she can only be taken seriously when she follows and dresses according to the beauty standards. Makeovers are a typical narrative trope to highlight the transformation of women gaining self-confidence, freedom of choice and assertiveness. The makeover paradigm here works as a tool to remove traces of nerdiness and difference: "makeover discourses hardly allow for difference, building a world of sameness and universalized normalcy that 'codes as conventionally gendered, white, middle class, heterosexually desirable, confident, and well-adjusted'" (Weber qtd. in Tato-Pazo 335). Hence, Betty's makeover, even though it gives her newfound confidence, ultimately aims at pleasing everyone and fitting the conventional mould. Here, humor affirms the normative function of femininity in that Betty's makeover aims at incorporating her into the tropes of emphasized, Europeanized femininity by removing any mark of difference, nerdiness and uniqueness. Emphasized femininity, according to Kincaid, Sennott and Kelly, means maintaining a subordinate position, complying with men's power and exaltation of conventional feminine attributes such as nurturance and good virtues (308).
- 11 Another important aspect of Betty's identity is being a Latina. Representations of Latinas in film and television are mostly characterized by hypersexualization and hot-

headed temperament: “Sexuality plays a central role in the tropicalization of Latinas through widely circulated narratives of sexual availability and desirability, through which the bodies of women of color have been excessively exoticized” (Valdivia and Guzman 211). This hypersexualization of Latinas is also visible in the prominent example of Gloria Pritchett in the popular American sitcom *Modern Family*, which uses this pattern to satirize such representation in media and popular culture. Gloria is considered an extremely beautiful and attractive woman who is repetitively ogled by her stepson-in-law, Phil Dunphy, and is judged and given jealous looks by her stepdaughter Claire Dunphy, while her sexuality is capitalized on by her much older husband, Jay Pritchett. Gloria’s sexuality, accent and fashion are always made fun of, highlighting her difference. “The spitfire Latina beauty is characterized by red-colored lips, bright seductive clothing, curvaceous hips and breasts, long brunette hair, and extravagant jewelry” (Valdivia and Guzman 211). Such exoticization and othering perpetuate the “virgin and whore”—dichotomy relating to Latina sexuality and Latin American cultures (Gonzalez 29) which “offer limited perceptions of sexual Latinas as ‘bad’ women, or traitors. Moreover, ‘good’ Latinas must remain asexual or constrained by maternal roles” (Calafell qtd. in Gonzalez 29).

- 12 Based on this dichotomy, Betty becomes the “good” Latina, as she is sacrificial, loyal, caring, family-oriented and fixes every problem. She is a selfless and altruistic protagonist who puts family and friends first. However, Betty also desires to explore her sexuality, has sexual fantasies, multiple love interests in Joaquín and Armando, indulges in a pre-marital sexual relationship with the married Armando and hides her birth control pill from her mother. In this regard, Betty breaks the image of the stereotypical sexual Latina while also negotiating the “good” Latina image. This makes Betty’s identity complex and subversive. As Gonzalez points out in relation to the protagonist of another series of the franchise, *Ugly Betty*:

Betty Suarez represents the antithesis of traditional iterations of the sexy Latina. In fact, if her family’s reactions to her dress, her career goals, and her genuine cluelessness to all things ethnic or popular are any indications, there may be very little that is televisually Latina about Betty at all. In contrast to traditional Latina/o stereotypes on the screen, Betty is intelligent, resourceful, hardworking, and kind. (43)

- 13 The franchise’s lead characters highlight ambivalence in terms of being an overtly good and erstwhile virginal protagonist as well as in subverting stereotypical representations of Latina sexuality, while maintaining the fairy-tale feel of romance and happy ending expected from a telenovela. Betty, therefore, does not confine herself to any particular binary but rather highlights the exemplification of stereotypes associated with them, therefore challenging and transcending both.
- 14 In conclusion, *Betty en NY* subverts and complicates both Latina stereotypization and geek identity. It showcases Betty’s intelligence being crucial to the plot, but at the same time she is continually ill-treated, bullied and deceived because of her perceived ugliness. Betty’s hardworking nature and nerdiness are her strengths, which the telenovela portrays accurately, but there is never enough support from her colleagues at the workplace to affirm that nerd identity. Through its dramatized humor, the show illustrates the arbitrary nature of normative ideals associated with female nerds, which is subversive, but not resistant. *Betty en NY* has a happy ending between Betty and her boss Armando. This need for a happy ending and various romantic entanglements makes Betty’s journey a *Cinderella* or *Ugly Duckling* plotline, reducing her nerdiness and

intellectual prowess to an obstruction and plot device to ultimately turn beautiful and end up with the male lead. In contrast, the humor of *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* directly challenges the stereotypes without overstating them. Protagonist Amy Santiago, for example, is another crucial workplace geek and nerd figure that takes a step further in terms of geeky, funny Latina workplace women in American TV. While in *Betty en NY* humor takes place at the cost of the nerd, Amy is not the object of jokes.

3. Amy Santiago: The Ultimate Nerd?

- 15 In American network TV, comedies were mainly presented in the form of sitcoms and considered a lower form of entertainment. Sitcoms usually fit the half-hour schedule of broadcast television, had an ensemble cast where a café or a couch would be the center of humor, and the plot featured absurd, funny, uncomfortable situations. The humor of sitcoms mainly derived from stereotyped characterizations, for example, “*The Nanny* (1993–1999), whose six seasons were little more than a long succession of variations on the same theme, which did not detract from the show’s comic power” (Savorelli 26-27).
- 16 Sitcoms usually use a set template of conventions propagating certain norms and conventions in an episodic format aimed at restoring dominant values. *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* is an American police procedural sitcom that focuses on the lives of detectives of the 99th Precinct in the New York Police Department, based in Brooklyn. The sitcom from the outset introduces the typical format featuring archetypal characters and having jokes at their expense. But the show challenges these archetypes and uses humor to subvert generalized notions about these characters. The story revolves around detective Jake Peralta and his eccentric and endearing colleagues. One of them is Amy Santiago, a brilliant and meticulous Cuban American detective of the NYPD, and, later in the series, Jake and Amy become a couple. *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* adheres to the norms of the sitcom format in that it uses silly humor, but it also provides multi-layered narrative arcs to every character and highlights different and quirky strands in their personalities. It depicts exaggerated, slapstick and silly humor to amplify Amy’s nerdiness when she is made fun of or nobody laughs at her jokes, but in a relatable way, as she is presented as a part of the 99 group without being chastised for her nerdiness. Furthermore, Amy also laughs when a prank is played on her, defying the stereotype of uptight nerds lacking humor.
- 17 Amy is both a nerd and geek. She is highly passionate about her interests such as sewing, and she performs exceptionally well in both academic and professional contexts. Amy and her colleague Jake Peralta are in a bet as to who can catch the most criminals, reflecting her competitive streak (S1E1). She desires to have a good commanding officer who would be her mentor so that she can eventually become Captain herself one day, projecting that she is highly ambitious. Amy is obsessed with organization and gains immense thrill from administrative work and paperwork. She adheres to the rules and follows authority diligently. In one instance, she shows off her giant binder from her conflict resolution seminar and makes an itinerary for her Thanksgiving party, detailing who can take toilet breaks at what time, which comically reflect her need to meticulously plan everything (S1E10). She goes to math conferences, typing camp and submits the photo of her organized desk to the journal *Organizers Quarterly*. She also gets aroused by Jake’s full attendance record. Her hobbies include solving quizzes and arranging books in the library when they are not on the designated

shelf. In all of these instances, she embraces nerdiness as part of her identity and is a proud nerd by choice. When Captain Holt says to Amy, “No offense, but you are something of a teacher's pet,” she responds, “None taken. People love their pets” (S2E2, 00:03:01).

- 18 Her narrative arc focuses on her choice to identify as a geek, rather than some outside forces' imposition. This self-identification makes her geekiness endearing. The show represents acceptance on two levels, Amy's own championing of her nerd identity, and its acceptance by her partners and colleagues. Unlike Betty, Amy's nerdiness is accepted and propelled by all the members of the 99th precinct irrespective of ranks. Sarah Selzer notes that the female geek or nerd “chooses her own narrative over the narrative of a conformist society and demands to be accepted for who she is. And as punishment, pop culture robs her of her sex appeal” (Selzer qtd. in Lane 119). Although Gina, Captain Holt's assistant who is portrayed as overtly popular, sassy, and sometimes self-centered, frequently makes fun of Amy, Gina's treatment of Amy is not the show's perspective. Amy thus is not condemned for her nerdiness and defies prejudiced geek traits in that she is neither antisocial nor unattractive. In fact, through Amy's character, the show's creators redefine “geek” as funny, resistant and brilliant.
- 19 Geeks and nerds have traditionally existed on the fringes of mainstream society and have faced a lack of respectful portrayals in media (Neterer 115). *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* instead creates a positive, productive portrayal of Amy's character, which offers viewers an identificatory potential and challenges mainstream audiences' perception of geeks and nerds (Neterer 114). Despite Amy's acceptance and confidence in respect to her nerd identity, the series also attempts to portray Amy's struggle with it, which sometimes results in self-doubt. Amy wonders if she is uptight and “too high strung,” questioning the part of her personality that needs to be perfect in everything in an obsessive-compulsive way (S5E9, 00:01:20). Therefore, in the rest of the same episode, she proves that she is completely unbothered in front of her colleagues by not caring about the flight being delayed and Captain Holt missing his commissioner interview. However, when they have lost all options for making it on time, it is Amy who helps Holt to still make it to the interview because of her planning skills, her expert use of a map, understanding of bureaucratic technicalities, and time management abilities. She subsequently earns a round of applause, which underlines that Amy's nerdiness is crucial to the precinct and is also celebrated by other members.
- 20 The show also highlights professional and personal conflicts that women nerds mostly face, as can be seen when Amy is nervous about her Sergeant exam even though she loves tests, but her fear goes deeper than the exam (S4E18). She fears that getting promoted as a Sergeant and becoming Jake's boss would alter their relationship, highlighting the common stereotype that women are not supposed to hold a higher position or be as intelligent as their husbands or boyfriends, and should thus hide their academic ability or choose between professional and social success (Innes 2-5). *Brooklyn Nine-Nine*, however, also subverts men's reaction towards female nerds through Jake's supportiveness. He responds, “I mean, this is your dream, from before we were dating. And yeah, things might change a little, but for the better, right? Look, you can't be afraid to be successful. You're too good for that” (S5E18).
- 21 Amy is the youngest Sergeant in the history of the NYPD in a historically male domain of law enforcement that reflects the patriarchal expectations and pressure women go through to prove themselves at their workplace, which frequently involves curtailing

their femininity so as to be taken seriously. Amy attempts to hide that she is looking for a wedding dress from her co-workers. She is reluctant to try on wedding dresses because, as she says, “being a female sergeant is difficult. I have to work twice as hard to gain my officers’ respect and looking at girly dresses isn’t going to help” (S5E18, 10:10). However, later in that episode, Amy catches the accused criminal while wearing the wedding dress, and Rosa, another Latina detective, provides assurance to Amy: “We’re going to talk about dresses, because while wearing a wedding dress you leapt over a couch, sprinted down an alley, and jumped off a car to subdue the crap out of a perp like you were Wonder Woman. You are an amazing cop and a great leader, and you’ve proven that a billion times over” (00:20:10).

- 22 Amy’s geek and nerd representation is not ambivalent or a matter of discomfort for her and her squad. Her brilliance and relentless competitiveness do not automatically make her an uptight or severely rule-obsessed woman. Captain Holt, while officiating Amy and Jake’s wedding, says, “It has been a true pleasure, to watch your distracting childish rivalry evolve into a distracting childish courtship and now, into what I’m sure will be a distracting childish marriage” (S5E22, 00:18:03)—revealing that Amy is not only a serious sergeant but also spontaneous when she wants to be. This shatters the uptight and humorless female geek stereotype, providing a deeper insight into the nerd characterization.
- 23 Geeks and nerds can be identified in shows through their lack of social and interpersonal skills. Betty is an ideal example for this in that she mostly stutters, does not enunciate her words and arguments well, and is always present to listen and take orders from Armando and Marcela. Amy, in turn, defies this pattern. Although she does hesitate and fumble at times in front of Captain Holt because she cannot conceive of a pleasing response to her mentor, whom she idealizes and constantly strives to impress, she is not afraid to point out the captain’s mistakes or voice her opinion when he decides to quit the NYPD. She also communicates openly about her feelings to her partner and does not get awkward around her peers. According to Sartain, appearance in terms of clothing and accessories “is in keeping with the trope of the physical appearance of the female geek body. Most commonly, female geeks are portrayed as intelligent but frumpy, asexual individuals who are divorced from their own embodiments” (99), while the prototypical geek image is traditionally masculine and imagined as a bright young man of disheveled appearance, with sunken, glowing eyes, usually glued to computer consoles (Joseph Weizenbaum qtd. in Margolis and Fisher 66). Amy, in turn, usually dresses in smart and crisp pantsuits with pink and blue blouses at her workplace, and outside of work is seen wearing beautiful dresses and makeup, representing both her professional and feminine sides. She thus transcends both spaces and does not stick to one defined way of portraying herself as a geek and nerd.
- 24 In *Brooklyn Nine-Nine*, Amy’s physique and personality, although marked as beautiful and desirable, subvert exoticized Latina body and sexuality stereotypes. The stereotypical binary of the maternal and good protagonist, which comes with being overtly present for family, is not the primary focus in the sitcom. Amy is not shown as family-oriented but rather as someone who is highly competitive because of her seven brothers, having to prove that she is tougher than them. Her family are not present either during one of her Thanksgiving parties nor her wedding. One of the brothers, David, is shown to outperform her in everything, from passing the Lieutenant’s exam

before her to receiving a platinum certificate in marksmanship, whereas Amy holds the golden one (S6E9). Amy's mother apparently also appreciates, values and loves David more, pointing to animosity and unresolved issues within Amy's family. There is also a striking gender bias within the family dynamics, as Amy has to constantly prove to herself that she is good enough. Therefore, Amy's character becomes highly relatable for women of color who struggle with such family expectations and biases. Neither of the Latina women of *Brooklyn Nine-Nine*, neither Rosa Diaz nor Amy Santiago, conforms to "spicy and sassy" stereotypes because the show's writers simply "wrote real human-being characters and then just gave the roles to two Latinas," as Melissa Fumero, who plays Amy Santiago, has pointed out (De Maria). In sum, Amy's nerdiness is not simply present to fulfill the sitcom character and humor quota by only presenting her as uptight, asexual and unlikeable. Rather, Amy's nerdiness is further propelled through humor and celebrated in the series.

4. Devi Vishwakumar: Ambivalent Indian Nerd

- 25 Devi of Netflix's *Never Have I Ever* (2020-2023) combines aspects of South Asian representation with geekiness and nerdiness to present a diverse, funny and delightful female nerd figure in a contemporary comedy TV series. *Never Have I Ever* explores the story of the 15-year-old protagonist Devi Vishwakumar who represents a layered and ambivalent perspective in terms of her Indian American identity and nerdiness through humor. Devi is more of a nerd but highlights elements of geekiness as well. She is a brilliant, academically exceptional and highly hardworking student with perfect scores in all her exams who aims to go to Princeton University. She constantly fights with her academic rival Ben as to who can score the highest and answer every question raised by the teacher. Devi's best friends Fabiola and Eleanor also seek interests and hobbies that are stereotypically geeky: Fabiola lives and breathes robots and is the captain of the robotics team, while Eleanor is interested in acting and takes part in the school theatre.
- 26 The premise of the series entails features of a high-school teen comedy show, which usually consists of conventional characterizations and narrative. School becomes an important setting in such narratives as it is a crucial social institution that shapes and influences teens' identities, relationships and social status. Stock characters of high school comedies include nerdy, overachieving and extremely academic types in contrast to hip/cool, popular, charming, and/or sport enthusiasts (Quail 461). There exists a hierarchy where the cool characters are placed higher in the social order of the school ecosystem than the geeky characters, who are usually portrayed as outcasts (Lane 5-8). The world of an American teen comedy consists of major conversations, conflicts and revelations mainly taking place in the school hallway around the lockers, school gyms or sports events, in classrooms, and at parties that are thrown by cool and rich teenagers in the absence of their parents. Teen comedies and dramas furthermore include unrequited crushes, budding first relationships and, most importantly, discovering and exploring one's identity in the course of the series (Garcia-Munoz and Fedele 136).
- 27 *Never Have I Ever* incorporates such tropes and the setting of high school to highlight Devi's positionality as an Indian American nerd. Unlike Amy, who has a nerd and geek identity, Devi cannot fully embrace it, as she is an outcast. This hesitance arises because

of her ambivalence towards her hyphenated Indian and American identity. Her parents, especially her father, chose to come to America to fulfil their American Dream through hard work and determination to live a more prosperous life (Parrillo 133). This drive to be successful positions and stereotypes Asian communities to be engrossed in studies and focus solely on academics, hence inadvertently presenting them as geeks and nerds. Such a simplistic perspective then creates further stereotypes of Asians. Therefore, the shows in question here represent Latin and South Asian identities in a way that focuses on education and rigorous hard work as cornerstones to be accepted in American society.

- 28 The first scene of the show portrays Devi requesting the Hindu gods to give her thinner forearm hair, the opportunity to turn down cocaine, and facilitate a relationship with a “stone cold hottie” (S1E1, 00:00:34). This scene highlights her desire to fit the mainstream American way of school and teenage culture. She prays with full dedication, as she is supposed to do, but the content of her prayers involves her desire to be elevated from her status of an outcast at school, an “unfuckable nerd” (S1E1, 00:00:40), to a popular and likeable teenager, instead of praying for better grades and getting admitted to Princeton. Here, Devi’s Indian identity, combined with her nerdiness, creates uncertainty and an ambivalent identity. Devi’s ambivalence regarding her identity also emerges because she feels Indian culture is regressive, highly focused on values and rules and sometimes overwhelming and stifling (e.g., in S1E3, Devi is shooting a Tik Tok dance video with her friends while wearing a strappy bodycon dress and her mother immediately makes her wear a white T-shirt under the dress). Devi’s attempts to be more American can be attributed to this geographical and cultural polarization (Lee 58). Lee further talks about ambivalent identity as a kind of split: “Ambivalent split refers to being and identifying and not being and not identifying.... Ambivalence evolves into contradiction because of the inability to resolve the disparate images” (Lee 59).
- 29 This disparity can be understood through Devi’s view of her American identity that she chooses to emphasize more than her Indian identity. Devi’s father strived for the American Dream as he moved from India with his family in pursuit of a better life. Since Devi has always been closer to her father and idolized and wanted to be like him in every way, she, therefore, subconsciously leans towards her American identity. Devi is also the only Indian girl in the school, and she believes that this positions her on the periphery and not the center, so she strives to feel more accepted and included in a Western, American cultural setup. Here, aspects of her Indian identity are othered by the dominant influence of American society and lifestyle, whereas her nerdiness has been inculcated in her mostly by her parents, hampering her acceptance of an Indian nerd identity.
- 30 Despite Devi’s hesitance to embrace her nerd identity, she never lets go of it or actively works towards discarding it. She scores best grades in all her classes, passionately does group tasks so that her group can win and does all the extracurricular activities rigorously to improve her Princeton application. At the same time, however, she also aims to have typical high school experiences like dating the “hottest jock” of the school, attending “cool” parties, making Tik Tok videos in pretty dresses, and having sex. Devi’s persistence to climb the social hierarchy of the school highlights that teenage female nerds do not necessarily have to always subscribe to the position of the

outcasts and follow the conventional tropes of being a nerd. Devi's quirks and nerdiness are not molded or normalized to please the non-geeks.

- 31 As Devi's identity is infused with ambivalence and paradoxes, the humor of the show mirrors this identity conflict and becomes ambivalent humor. Krefting, in relation to charged humor, proposes that humor can act as a tool for reinscribing one's social and cultural position when it is performed by the members of the dominant society or in alignment with hegemonic norms (18). Humor can also act as a mode of resistance and subversion of such hegemonic norms and stereotypes where one is always determined and identified by being fixed at the extreme end of a dichotomous relationship with the dominant discourse, hence, considered outside the "center" and on the periphery (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 36).
- 32 However, the conflicting humor of the show highlights the discrepancy between "Western" and "Other" narratives. It showcases the stereotypes, conventions and perceptions "Western" narratives hold when viewing the "Other" as one-dimensional and reductive but, at the same time, certain conventions and norms do have elements of identification and truthfulness, which shapes and defines this "Other" narrative. *Never Have I Ever* therefore uses exaggerated humor while playing on familiar tropes of Indian culture and representation, e.g. through gossiping aunties, controlling mothers, patriarchal uncles, arranged marriage setups, and overly strict customs. These tropes could be attributed as stereotypical and exaggerated, but they are highly relatable to both Indian and Indian American audience. Therefore, Devi's embarrassment and conflict with her Indian heritage is also relatable these audiences.
- 33 However, Devi's ambiguity towards her culture does not immediately diminish her role and positionality in resistance against overused ways of viewing of her culture. Rather, the show subverts and produces layers through stereotypes by portraying fissures and tensions between these established cultural norms through humor. This subversion takes place when humor is enacted and hyperbolized by the members of the "Othered" group. Ambivalence enables postcolonial and diasporic discourses to negotiate and grasp the differences, incongruities and contradictions of hyphenated cultures and norms. The political and ideological effect of the humor of the show in the context of opposing domination is not "a violent counter-force (which can reproduce domination in another guise); nor a revolutionary, sovereign subject;... 'there is a degree of mutuality and complicity between the agent and the hegemon, even if each may want to deny it'" (Kapoor qtd. in Källistig and Death 8). Ambivalent humor and identity are hence embedded in each other as well as in both colonizer/western/dominant and "Other"/colonized discourses and narratives.
- 34 Despite this relationship, elements of resistance and subversion always remain and therefore become pronounced. For example, Nalini, Devi's mother, believes that therapy is meant for white people, but in the finale episode of the first season, Nalini finally accepts in front of Devi's (Black) therapist that she always tries to be tough in front of Devi and does not know how to deal with her grief. She finally accepts that it is okay to show her pain and starts crying. Her rejection of therapy comes from a cultural and individual perception because going to therapy and being vulnerable is considered foreign. Similarly, when Indian aunties taunt Nalini for coloring her hair (S1E4), she retorts that she did not want to let go of herself completely and that her love for her husband would not diminish if her grey hair were not showing. The show thus also plays on the formulaic perception and stereotypes of Indians being community-

oriented. But it also subverts the stereotype by making fun and presenting the communal events, such as Ganesh Puja, as marked by rivalry and gossip.

- 35 Devi subverts another aspect of her geek identity by exploring her sexuality, which creates further in-betweenness. In the very first episode, Devi upfront asks her crush Paxton Hall Yoshida if he wants to have sex with her even though Paxton does not know her, opposing the cultural expectations which compel Indian women to hold the traditional values of being chaste, pure and not having premarital sex. This comical scene portrays a young teenage girl's fantasy yet also acts as a way of resistance when it positions Devi as Indian. The humorous display of her fantasies produces a new negotiation in which Indian women can also explore their sexuality irrespective of their parents' disapproval.

South Asian Americans come from collectivistic, hierarchical cultures and value interdependence. Acculturation can be an influencing factor in whether and how South Asian Americans follow traditional beliefs and practices. Typically, children of any age, even in adulthood, are considered reflections of their parents and carry the honor of their families. For many immigrant parents, dating is equated with pre-marital sex and physical intimacy, both of which are still frowned upon and result in impurity for marriage, particularly for women. (Khera and Ahluwalia 21)

- 36 Here, the onus of upholding the tradition of one's culture lies more evidently on women, but Devi and her cousin Kamala subverts those norms, having imbibed and following mainstream American dating culture as indicative of the constant juxtaposition of cultural identities.
- 37 Devi's quest with her identity, grief, friendship, and teenage life evolves through her failings, mischief and faults. She reconfigures the depiction of culturally diverse female nerds who are mostly portrayed as awkward in typical social situations, are usually sidelined, and badgered by the "hips/jocks" or, alternatively, consider themselves elitist and above such teenage shenanigans. Even though Devi has not reached self-acceptance of her nerd identity, she is well aware that being a nerd is one of her crucial strengths and a key aspect of her personality. Ultimately, Devi's love interest and the "cool jock" of the school Paxton seeks Devi's tutoring and guidance to perform well in school. Instead of intensifying Quail's hip/square dialectic, the supposed nerds and jocks are shown to be interdependent and intertwined with each other across multiple storylines and evolving characterizations, hence blurring the boundaries between such binaries. Unlike the narratives of popular teen shows that focus on the perspectives and lives of the popular teenagers who are predominantly white, e.g., current shows such as *Pretty Little Liars*, *Gossip Girl* or *Riverdale*, *Never Have I Ever* focuses on the nerdy and the unpopular group of the school. Here, teenagers who are placed lower in the school's social ranking are the central protagonists instead of being reduced to minor characters. Devi's Indian nerdiness thus also provides space for identification and representation of culturally and ethnically diverse female nerds, subverting the notion of nerds being predominantly white and male.

5. Conclusion

- 38 Popular culture, especially through representations in film and TV series, has long reinforced the idea that intelligence and desirability cannot easily coexist in a female character. Comedy series and sitcoms traditionally used humor to maintain stereotypical tropes as well as normative narrative arcs and characterizations.

However, with the emergence of narrative complexity (see Mittell 14) in television the depiction of nerdiness and geekiness has changed. Female nerds and geeks are slowly shaping their narrative and create subversion against the norms that regularize their intelligence and femininity or choosing between them. Female nerds have created a space of their own, fostering televisual representations of geeky women who do not have to conceal their femininity to be considered brilliant. *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* in its trademark sitcom fashion uses silly humor to demystify the ideals of female nerds and geeks in workplace being cold, elitist and humorless. It also opposes stereotypical representations Latina sexuality and culture. Similarly, *Never Have I Ever* uses its humor to portray the dilemmas of a second-generation Indian American teenage girl who is also a nerd and feels conflicted in terms of her Indianness. It raises important conversations around identity, belonging, familial relationships and stereotypes surrounding the Indian and Indian diasporic communities. Such engaging and multi-layered female nerds and geeks, especially in comedy series, mark the purpose of humor as demonstrating the complexity and contradictions of current identity discourse.

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NOTES

1. Telenovelas, with their origin in Latin America, are dramatic narratives, frequently imbued with humour, and even more consistently full of romantic liaisons, improbable storylines and melodrama. *Betty en NY* is produced by Telemundo Global Studio for Telemundo Network which is now available on Netflix. This is the newest adaptation of *Ugly Betty* (2006-2010), itself an adaptation of the Colombian original *Betty la Fea* (1999-2001), and it features a diasporic community in an American space. *Betty en NY* caters to the Spanish-speaking community, especially. For more information, see Miller.

2. Other dramatic aspects would include Marcela's spying on Betty, or Betty's mother's heart attack after knowing about her daughter's fraud.

ABSTRACTS

The “nerd” or “geek” in US-American film and television has been a popular mainstay to represent distinct social hierarchies. This article aims to highlight the emergence of engaging and relatable female nerds and geeks that subvert the stereotypes associated with such figures in comedy TV series and sitcoms. Humour in these comedy series exposes the silliness of perceived stereotypes associated with geekdom and “othered” cultures, while at the same time questioning and resisting them through complex female characterization. This article analyses these current shifts in representational patterns that highlight different dimensions including race, sexuality, societal conflicts and interpersonal relationships of funny and “nerdy” female characters in American television. Through a comparative analysis of the geeky characterizations of Amy Santiago from *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* (2013-2021) in juxtaposition to Betty from *Betty en NY* (2019), and Devi Vishwakumar from *Never Have I Ever* (2020-2023) it demonstrates that gender and racial stereotypes influence the portrayal of “geeky” female characters who frequently have not been permitted to be fully developed characters but had to suppress their intelligence to be likeable. This portrayal has significantly changed into the depiction of powerful female nerds on screen in the last two decades.

INDEX

Keywords: gender, humour, television, diaspora, identity

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Ankita Dolai is a doctoral student at the University of Augsburg. As a part of her PhD thesis she hopes to analyse excess in women's comedy as a mode of feminist intervention and develop a deeper understanding of how humour acts as a form of female resistance.