UNWRAPPING THE WINGS OF THE TELEVISION SHOW:

THE WEST WING

By

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Anindita Biswas

Unwrapping the Wings of the Television Show

The West Wing

Thesis under the direction of Dr. Mary Dalton, Ph.D., Professor of Communication

My thesis project is a textual analysis of the television show The West Wing using John Fiske’s narrative analysis approach and Douglas Kellner’s multicultural and multiperspectival critical cultural theory. My initial venture into the show was more a chance to get away from commonplace television shows, such as family dramas and soap operas, than an opportunity to think critically about the interplay between culture and politics. What began as a casual television viewing session soon became a dinnertime ritual and finally challenged me enough to begin exploring the possibility of analyzing the show for my thesis project. Politics and the presidency in America make an interesting combination, and it is captivating for a viewer like me, who is originally from another culture, to explore these topics. Many questions have arisen for me from watching the series and considering its implications. What can we make out of the gender portrayals as seen in the series, especially as every female character is either the secretary, assistant, wife to the President, someone in every case who facilitates the voice of the President with not much voice of her own? What conclusions can we draw when we see people of color only serving the President as personal assistants in the early episodes of the show then, when diversifying the cast later, to include a couple of African American characters in prestigious roles that remain peripheral to the central action? How do we interpret the fact that a show of this caliber does not make much effort to address concerns like sexual preference and social class, claiming to be liberal and progressive at the same time?

The underlying complexities of individual identity and political diversity lie at the heart of the show, which debuted in fall 1999 and had an average of twenty million viewers tuning in every week. Written and produced exclusively by Aaron Sorkin and co-produced by Thomas Schlamme for the first four seasons, this show features the activities of the senior White House staff. Produced by Warner Bros. Television Limited, the series has won over twenty Emmy Awards, out of which nine came in the first season itself, which is a record for the most Emmys won by a series in a single season. The series shares the Emmy award record for the most acting nominations by regular cast members for a single series in a year with Hill Street Blues and L.A. Law. The series is also credited with winning two Screen Actors Guild (SAG) awards in 2000 and 2001 in the category of Outstanding Performance by an Ensemble in a drama series. My study is a textual analysis of The West Wing using John Fiske’s narrative analysis approach and Douglas Kellner’s multicultural and multiperspectival critical cultural theory, reading the show both historically and topically. My point of emphasis will be to use categorization schemes to identify and explain the narrative patterns related to the characters and storylines presented in the show. My study will involve looking at how Kellner’s
multiperspectival categories of representation are presented in the series and examining the implications of the interface between larger issues of cultural politics with the representations of gender, race, sexuality, and social class by applying John Fiske’s narrative theory across the four categories and also applying relevant theories specific to each one. The political dynamics if the show is no doubt, very exciting but I am more intrigued by the depiction of power relationships, gender roles, sexual dynamics along with race and social class issues as the show handles them for the seven seasons that it was aired for. Each of the categories will be examined with specific episodes, incorporating other theorists like Laura Mulvey, Stuart Hall and Judith Butler to name a few. One of the important elements in the show is the aspect of disability, which is a recurring issue. This is depicted in the form of the President dealing with Multiple Sclerosis (MS) and forms a key part of the story line following the second season of the show. This category is not included in Kellner’s categories for analyzing media culture and will form a part of my study since it forms a critical part of this narrative.
Chapter One

Introduction

“Say they’re smug and superior. Say their approach to public policy makes you want to tear your hair out. Say they like high taxes and spending your money. Say they want to take your guns and open your borders. But don’t call them worthless…the people that I have met have been extraordinarily qualified, their intent is good. Their commitment is true. They are righteous and they are patriots.”

-Ainsley Hayes, “In this White House”
Episode 2, season 4, 25th October 2000.

Ainsley Hayes, a character on the television drama The West Wing, holds the position Associate White House Counsel. A Republican chosen to serve a Democratic President, Ainsley’s attitude towards the Bartlet administration is initially negative, but her perspective changes after she sees the President handle a sensitive international situation with great skill. Ainsley’s character does not undergo any ideological transformation; she simply realizes that the President and his staff are individuals who are bright and patriotic even though their liberal views cause some conservative characters to describe them in negative terms. This example is one of many that could be chosen to illustrate the competing ideologies expressed on the series The West Wing.
My initial venture into the television show *The West Wing* was more a chance to get away from commonplace television shows, such as family dramas and soap operas, than an opportunity to think critically about the interplay between culture and politics. What began as a casual television viewing session soon became a dinnertime ritual and finally challenged me enough to begin exploring the possibility of analyzing the show for my thesis project. Politics and the presidency in America make an interesting combination, and it is captivating for a viewer like me, who is originally from another culture, to explore these topics. Many questions have arisen for me from watching the series and considering its implications. What can we make out of the gender portrayals as seen in the series, especially as every female character is either the secretary, assistant, wife to the President, someone in every case who facilitates the voice of the President with not much voice of her own? What conclusions can we draw when we see people of color only serving the President as personal assistants in the early episodes of a show then, when diversifying the cast later, to include a couple of African American characters in prestigious roles that remain peripheral to the central action? How do we interpret the fact that a show of this caliber does not make much effort to address concerns like sexual preference and social class, claiming to be liberal and progressive at the same time?

A careful reading of media culture involves the intersection of gender, race, sexuality, and social class, as proposed by Douglas Kellner (95). The study of popular and mass mediated culture has been labeled as cultural studies and as Kellner writes that:

> The media cultural texts are neither merely vehicles of dominant ideology, nor pure and innocent entertainment. Rather they are complex artifacts that embody social and
political discourses whose analysis and interpretation require methods of reading and critique that articulate their embeddedness in the political economy, social relations and the political environment within which they are produced, circulated and received. (4)

My point of interest in the show *The West Wing* lies in investigating the underlying aspects of gender, race, sexuality, and social class to find deeper textual meanings conveyed in the power laden politics of romantic and work relationships in the show. For me, the dominant ideas of the show in terms of representations of gender, race, sexual orientation, and social class on the show on the show will constitute the analysis along with mapping the relationships as they play out between the various characters using suitable theoretical frameworks as tools to help analyze the series.

As compared to the other artistic forms, television undoubtedly is a medium that expresses the dominant cultural perspectives in order to be successful. Horace Newcomb and Paul Hirsch point out that television’s primary focus is the cultural role of entertainment and this parallels with “a close analysis of television program content in all its various textual forms” (25). Television functions primarily as a cultural form that motivates analysis of the nature of the meanings emerging from the texts created by that medium. Kellner argues that media culture in recent times has become a dominant force of socialization where new models of identification and resonant images of style, fashion and behavior have been created (17). Being surrounded by new technologies, new modes of cultural production and new forms of social and political life, culture has now assumed a dominant role in every realm of contemporary society with multifarious functions in
both economic and social life. Artifacts of media culture are not the result of innocent entertainment but involved with agendas and ideologies related to consumer culture that make it essential for an engaged public to read media culture politically. In creating a successful show, the unconscious minds of the creators and the producers end up with ideologies that, in turn, may be seen as representing a specific agenda by some section of the audience. Media culture, just like political discourses, helps in establishing the hegemony of specific political groups and produces representations that make audiences look upon specific ideologies as “the way things naturally are or created for innocent entertainment.”

My study is a textual analysis of *The West Wing* using John Fiske’s narrative analysis approach and Douglas Kellner’s multicultural and multiperspectival critical cultural theory. I will analyze the television drama *The West Wing* to explore the socializing forces of cultural politics on the series. My point of emphasis will be to use categorization schemes to identify and explain the narrative patterns related to the characters and storylines presented on the show. My study will involve looking at how Kellner’s multiperspectival categories of representation are presented in the series and examining the implications of the interface between larger issues of cultural politics with the representations of gender, race, sexuality, and social class by applying John Fiske’s narrative theory across the four categories and also applying relevant theories specific to each one.

According to Fiske, television functions as a cultural agent, particularly as a provoker and circulator of meanings (1). Broadcasting programs that are rife with potential meanings, television attempts to control and focus the meaningfulness of the
medium into a more singular preferred meaning that performs the work of the dominant ideology (2). Using Douglas Kellner’s critical multicultural perspective, which, in his conceptualization, involves analysis of relationships of domination and oppression and stresses the need for adopting a wide range of perspectives to understand and interpret cultural phenomena, I will analyze the different episodes of the show trying to bring out the dominant categories in the different seasons emphasizing that gender conflicts and dynamics, race deliberations, multiethnic and multicultural nationalism, elements of individual and collective identity related to sexuality and social class, and relationship constructs are critical components of the ideological and political constructs propagated by *The West Wing*.

The underlying complexities of individual identity and political diversity lie at the heart of the show, which debuted in fall 1999 and had an average of twenty million viewers tuning in every week. The show was impeccably timed, as Stephen Cole in his article “End of Term: The revolutionary series *The West Wing* leaves a considerable legacy” points out, this was the same year Bill Clinton faced impeachment charges for lying under oath about an affair with a White House intern while his Republican successor, evangelical Christian George W. Bush, was getting ready to capture his party’s nomination for the 2000 Presidential election.

Written and produced exclusively by Aaron Sorkin and co-produced by Thomas Schlamme for the first four seasons, this show features the activities of the senior White House staff. The cast of smart, engaging characters is led by President Josiah (Jed) Bartlet, a liberal Democrat hailing from New Hampshire. Played by Martin Sheen, President Bartlet is an idealistic politician, who inspires his equally idealistic and earnest
staff. Key characters are as follows: Chief of Staff Leo McGarry (John Spencer), Deputy Chief of Staff Josh Lyman (Bradley Whitford), Chief Communications Director Toby Ziegler (Richard Schiff), Deputy Communications Director Sam Seaborn (Rob Lowe), and White House Press Secretary C.J.Cregg (Allison Janney), who goes on to become the Chief of Staff by the end of the sixth season of the show.

*The West Wing* successfully dramatizes the moral ambiguity and complex layered relationships between the private and public spheres. Creating stories about politics, *The West Wing*, gave viewers a weekly-behind-the-scenes-peek into the Oval Office during its original broadcast, holding up for scrutiny the inner workings of the federal government. Unlike most films about high political offices, which focus almost exclusively on candidates who undergo unflattering transformations, this show has been characterized as a “polidrama” with “educational content.”(Berger 2000, 61).

Former White House Press Secretary Dee Dee Myers and expert pollster Patrick Caddell served as consultants for the show from the beginning, helping writers and actors depict their parts accurately. With an elite culture of powerful decision makers on the show trying to make sense of chaotic political life, the series moved beyond contemporary policy debates to explore more fundamental concepts of political power and relationships. The scriptwriters sought advice from the commentators on the Right, such as Peggy Noonan, former adviser to Ronald Regan, in order to present the opposition case. This helps explain why debate among characters who represent different political points of view on the show sounds genuine, regardless of the issue under discussion. Because everyone in the series takes democracy seriously, politics appears to be an edifying and noble calling. Former White House Press Secretary Michael McCurry
told *Brill’s Content* magazine in an interview that *The West Wing* is “the first series in a long while that has treated those who work in politics as human beings” (Miller 2000, 90).

Produced by Warner Bros. Television Limited, the series has won over twenty Emmy Awards, out of which nine came in the first season itself, which is a record for the most Emmys won by a series in a single season. The show earned an Emmy nomination in each of its seven seasons and ranks eighth all-time in the number of Emmy awards won. The series shares the Emmy award record for most acting nominations by regular cast members for a single series in a year with *Hill Street Blues* and *L.A.Law*. The third season of the show saw nine cast members nominated for an Emmy while twenty individual Emmys were awarded to writers, actors, and crew members. With regular high ratings, *The West Wing* was a real success among high income viewers in the eighteen-to-forty-nine age group, and the third-season finale of the show was watched by about sixteen million viewers, which is a sizeable audience even if it represents a decline from the twenty million who watched the second season finale (Parry Giles, 12). In the words of a *George* magazine article, this series is “a zeitgeist show, a reflection of the tenor of our times” (48). In its four-year run on television, *The West Wing* was able to explore a number of issues, all of which were worked into the storylines with rapid fire dialogue and witty repartee in dealing with the political debates of the “real world.” The opening double-length episode of the second season titled “In the Shadow of Two Gunmen” drew a huge audience of nearly twenty five million viewers, with new plot lines and a host of new characters that kept it at the forefront of the TV viewing world, even with the
appearance of new reality shows such as *Temptation Island* (aired on Fox in the same Wednesday night time slot) and *Survivor: The Australian Outback* (Paul Challen, 6)

*The West Wing* is also credited with holding the Emmy Award record for most acting nominations overall (including guest performance) in a single year, at twelve acting nominations, and Allison Janney is the record holder for most wins by a cast member with four Emmys. Providing provocative political dialogue and strong ratings, the show finished thirteenth in the Nielsen Ratings in its second season and stood seventh in the fall of 2001. The series is also credited with winning two Screen Actors Guild (SAG) awards in 2000 and 2001 in the category of Outstanding Performance by an Ensemble in a drama series. Martin Sheen is the only cast member of the show credited with winning a Golden Globe, and the series picked up the Peabody Award for excellence in broadcasting in both 1999 and 2000. At the annual Television Critics Association (TCA) awards in July, this show became the first series in history to grab the awards for drama of the year, best new program of the year and program of the year.

The poor image of politics and as well as the risk of turning off a major chunk of the audience, was the primary reason why the production executives were initially apprehensive about the show. Yet, the first season of the show saw consistent high ratings, as Robins describes it, “thirteen million literate, upscale viewers were watching the show every week” (203). Critical acclaim followed in the form of eighteen Emmy nominations with nine awards, breaking the previous record of eight in a single season set by *ER* and *Hill Street Blues*. Mixing reel life politics with real life politics, Aaron Sorkin made the cast of the show take a road trip from Hollywood to Washington D.C in April 2000 to tour the White House and meet political figures like Secretary of State Madeline
Albright and Gene Sperling, head of National Economic Council. *Time* magazine reported that actor Allison Janney, who portrays the role of Press Secretary C.J.Cregg on the show, standing at the at the White House press room podium, opened the midday briefing for White House spokesman Joe Lockhart. Actor John Spencer, who played Chief of Staff Leo McGarry, also visited the White House with his real-life counter part, then chief of Staff John Podesta, as a part of the trip (Pompper, 24).

Much of the commentary surrounding *The West Wing* has suggested that its early popularity was a reflection of the public disappointment in real Presidential politics. Weaving stories of members of the fictional Presidential administration, the show features characters filled with humor and dedication who touch the heart while discussing politics touching everyday life. Offering a rare glimpse into the inner workings of America’s most powerful address, 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, the reviews for the series ranged from negative to positive. The series garnered praise for Sorkin’s writing skills but also criticism for its unrealistic portrayal of unrelenting optimism. As television critic Heather Havrilesky points out, “…how do you go from innocent millipede to White House staffer without becoming soiled or disillusioned by the dirty realities of politics along the way?”(44). Perhaps the most consistent theme in reviews of the show was in labeling it as “pro-Left,” something with which even the most liberal viewers could not disagree. Earning the label *The Left Wing*, this show has been considered an attempt to take a positive look at the Clinton Presidency while also trying to fill the chasm between the left and the right in America.

John Podhoretz commented in a cover story in *Brill’s Content* (a short-lived investigative periodical) that “*The West Wing* presents a truer, more human picture of the
people behind the headlines than most of today’s Washington journalists” and adds that the characters “aren’t human beings--they’re noble soldiers in a noble cause, and they have been washed clean of every impurity because of it” (O’ Connor and Rollins, 4). Podhoretz also sees the show as “nothing more or less than political pornography for liberals, as the ultimate Hollywood fantasy: the Clinton White House without Clinton” and without its embarrassing scandals (46). Widely regarded as quality television, each episode includes storylines filled with both realistic and melodramatic elements, As New York Times television critic Caryn James points out, the show suffers from a “split personality” where the show’s realism and sardonic insights are undercut by the “emotional mushiness” and “inspirational uplift” of the scenes designed to cater to the viewing audience (204). Donnalyn Pompper suggests that, as a popular television drama, The West Wing “can complement journalism by offering an entertaining and realistic view of the White House that sharpens images of the presidency and national politics” (19). Pamela Beavers suggests that The West Wing can be used as an effective pedagogical tool in classrooms for the discussion of political issues and institutions; she argues that “in our era of sound-bite politics, The West Wing addresses many contemporary domestic and foreign policies at least as sensibly as do most government officials” (176). The show, in spite of being immensely popular, is looked upon by critics as being entertaining but not realistic as it presents a White House that is devoid of backstabbing, jockeying for position, and personal for ambition (Crawley, 26).

Beginning his career as a playwright, Aaron Sorkin’s first major success came with a Few Good Men on Broadway, a courtroom drama featuring a young, idealistic Navy lawyer as the main protagonist, a character who fights a systematic military cover-
up. Interest from Hollywood in *A Few Good Men* led to Sorkin adapt his play into a screenplay and to write films like *Malice* (1993) and *The American President* (1995). *The West Wing* started off from leftover dialogue from the 385-page original screenplay for *The American President*. This film served as an inspiration for the creation of the show *The West Wing*, which was initially rejected by the executives at NBC. Their argument was that a television show dealing with politics will not find much of an audience, which meant that the script was put on hold for the time being. Instead Sorkin created the television show *Sports Night*, which was broadcast on the ABC network from 1998 to 2000. The show won great critical acclaim but the low ratings of the show led to the cancellation of the show and the replacement of the network executives.

For the writer, the White House functions as an arena of ample dramatic exploration of personal and political life. Aaron Sorkin has faced a lot of criticism for depicting presidential administrations that come across as too slick, too leftist, and too good to be true (Smith, 2003; Lehman, 2001), but the main concern with *The West Wing* rests with issues, policies, behind-the-scenes details, and the diverse personalities of the White House Staff. As Sharon Waxman points out in *George*, *The West Wing* characters can be read as counterparts of the actual Clinton White House personnel: Sam Seaborn’s character was drawn from the character George Stephanopoulos, former Clinton aide, C.J.Cregg was modeled as Clinton Press Secretary Dee Dee Myers, and Josh Lyman as Clinton aide Paul Begala (O’Connor and Rollins, 3). Sorkin insists, however, that he made all of these characters up and that comparisons are pointless. Yet, in many interviews Sorkin has admitted that his characters are “heroic” versions of their real life public service counterparts. This is what he says about the idealized representations
created in his show, “I think the young men in my scripts have to be in some shape or form the husbands and boyfriends that women want. I think the fathers have to be the fathers that sons and daughters want. I think the bosses have to be the bosses employees want” (204). Similar subject matter and resounding sentiments have led to comparisons between Aaron Sorkin’s work and Italian-American filmmaker Frank Capra’s films, which is synonymous with patriotism and old-fashioned American idealism. The West Wing has been applauded for conveying “the complexities of politics and decision-making in the real world where few things are black and white” (Berger 61). The series has witnessed different episodes in various seasons tackling complex debates like racial profiling, the census, the AIDS epidemic in Africa, a comprehensive test ban treaty, estate tax, the use of statistical sampling to improve the U.S. census, shepherding legislation through Congress, environmental issues, domestic terrorism, hate crime and gun control legislation, gays in the military, school vouchers, drug abuse, labor disputes, anti Semitism, Christian fundamentalism and living with physical handicaps (Pompper, 30).

The series opens with the Bartlet administration dealing with legislative issues during the administration’s first year in office. Jed Bartlet is a Democratic President facing major political issues and a lackluster approval rating. Leo McGarry, the President’s Chief of Staff, seems to be in charge of day-to-day business in the White House but has his own personal demons to confront. Josh Lyman, the Deputy Chief of Staff, invariably ends up saying the wrong thing at absolutely the wrong time. Toby Ziegler is the Communications Director. C.J.Cregg, the only woman in the inner circle, is the White House Press Secretary. This group surrounding the President is rounded out by
Sam Seaborn, the Deputy Communications Director, who always falls for the wrong woman. These characters are developed and their work sphere is defined in the first season, which ends with shots being fired on the President in an attempted assassination. This inaugural season also explores a conflict between the President and the Vice President, examines a crisis between India and Pakistan, deals with gay rights in one of the episodes and drug use by a senior White House staffer in another.

The second season of the show launches with a brilliant opening following the immediate aftermath of the assassination attempt on the President. Jed Bartlet has to undergo surgery, and his wife Abigail Bartlet, who is a doctor, has to reveal to the anesthetist that the President suffers from Multiple Sclerosis (MS). The opening episodes switch back and forth between the President in the hospital and flashback scenes of Bartlet’s campaign for the Presidency. The revelation that the President suffers from MS becomes a pivotal plot point on the show as the President’s approval numbers dwindle and he cannot make up his mind whether or not to inform his staff members about his disease. This season concludes with the President questioning his faith after his secretary, who has been with him for more than 20 years, passes away in a tragic car accident. By the end of this season, President Bartlet decides to reveal to the public his medical condition, which leaves both the audience and his staff members wondering if he will decide to run for re-election.

The first episode of season three, which aired on October 3, 2001, picks up on the 9/11 attack on the World Trade Center and touches on the ideas of terrorism, Islamic fanaticism, and anti-Islamic prejudice. The episode is titled “Isaac and Ishmael” and depicts a group of young students touring the White House when everything suddenly
goes into crash mode—a situation in which no one is allowed to enter or exit the building because of a security threat. Each of the staff members come and speak to the group about the unspecified events and describe the roots of fanaticism. Over the course of this season, the series moves on to hearings for the MS scandal, the re-election campaign, and also touches upon the characters’ personal lives. Special attention is paid to C.J.’s attraction to the Secret Service Agent Simon Donovan, who gets killed, to Josh’s relationship with Amy, and to Donna’s affair with Clifford Calley, a Republican House Attorney.

Season four begins with individual storylines focusing on Toby, Josh, and Donna stranded in rural America, C.J. returns home to visit her father, who is suffering from Alzheimer Disease and the Ayatollah of Iran’s son visiting the US for a heart and lung transplant. Most part of the series, however, deals with the President’s campaign for re-election, which he wins eventually. This season also picks up on the plot of the assassination of the foreign minister of Qumar (a fictional Middle Eastern country), which starts in the third season and continues into season four. This storyline is used to address issues of gender discrimination in the Muslim world and the problem of state-sponsored terrorism. The most compelling storyline for this season is a coup in the fictional country of Kundu, which bears some resemblance to the civil war in Rwanda. This is also the season in which Rob Lowe, playing the role of Sam Seaborne, the Deputy Communications Director, decides to quit the show precipitating a change in the storyline to explain Sam Seaborns’s departure from the White House. Sam leaves the White House to run in a special election in California and Will Bailey takes Sam’s position having come out of the California campaign’s staff. This is also the season where the Vice
President Hoynes is forced to hand in his resignation after the discovery of a sex scandal which he is a part of. With his resignation, the Vice Presidency passes on to Glen Allen Walker, the Republican speaker of the house. This is also the last season of *The West Wing* with Aaron Sorkin at the helm as head writer and co-producer of the show. In May 2003, when the cast was filming the final episode of the fourth season, Aaron Sorkin and Thomas Schlamme announced that they were leaving the series. Bradley Whitford, who plays the Deputy Chief of Staff Josh Lyman, describes the moment as “an emotional holocaust” (Crawley, 7).

Moving down from number thirteen in the overall ranking of shows on November 1, 2003 to number fifteen two weeks later, the fifth season of the series *The West Wing* was quite a change from the previous seasons as John Wells took over key creative duties from Sorkin. The plot lines become contrived, and the characters appear as though they don’t really know what is going on at the White House. Lacking the pace and quick witted dialogue of the Sorkin era, season five has come to be known as the most regularly criticized season of the show. The low points of the season include the demise of Josh’s political power (which results in him screaming at the Capitol Building in frustration), the description of a recession as a bagel in one of the early episodes, and the season finale, which never quite meets the expectations built up from the finales of previous seasons.

The sixth season follows President Bartlet and his administrative staff as he enters his last year in the Oval office. Key storylines follow Bartlet as he battles MS and strives to make meaning out of his last year in the White House while the Democratic Party is tearing apart as candidates line up to replace him as President. Most of the stories in this season are a good mix of political tension coupled with some humor. A lot of attention is
paid to Senator Arnold Vinick (Alan Alda), the Republican candidate, and Matthew Santos (Jimmy Smits), the Democratic candidate, as they vie for the Presidency. The season’s best moments come from the campaign trail where the primaries witness the most appealing characters pitch against each other such as the good natured political operative Josh Lyman is forced to face his long term aide and secretary, Donna Moss.

The seventh season takes viewers back to Sorkin’s style of work, in terms of the new production unit trying to imitate his production techniques, after two seasons of awkward dialogue patterns and mismanaged plot. This season resembles the first couple of seasons of the show in the sense that character development and plot are once again compelling and exciting. This season bids farewell to actor John Spencer in a three-part episode titled “Election Day: Part 1,” “Election Day: Part 2,” and “Requiem.” C.J tries to deal with the additional pressure of being promoted to the position of White House Chief of Staff from White House Press Secretary, and Josh Lyman leads the Santos campaign and resolves the sexual tension that has existed for some time between him and his secretary, Donna Moss. The untimely death of John Spencer prompts Martin Sheen to comment in an on-air interview, “Johnny, it seems we hardly knew you.” The series which was watched by an audience of seventeen million during its peak was reduced to an audience of 7.6 million viewers in its seventh and last season.

The series began with Sorkin’s intention to center the show on Sam Seaborn, Bartlet’s Deputy Communications Director, while the President is positioned in an unseen or secondary role. The reason why Rob Lowe decides to quit the show in its fourth season was attributed to the positive critical and public reaction to Martin Sheen’s performance as President Bartlet. Martin Sheen as the fictional President Bartlet, as Janet
Daley writes in the article “If you didn’t get The West Wing, you won’t understand America” in The Telegraph, was “not only a man of impeccable Left-liberal conscience, flawless personal virtue and unfailing practical judgment, he was also an intellectual of the first rank- with Lincoln’s eloquence, Roosevelt’s social compassion and Jefferson’s intellect: a Platonic ideal of liberal consciousness made flesh”(31 july, 2006)

Martin Sheen has been described as “Hollywood’s most prominent…social activist, having been arrested sixty-one times for protesting issues such as nuclear armament (Feuerherd 2000, 47). For Martin Sheen, this was not the first time that he was presented with the Herculean task of portraying the President of United States on screen. He played the Chief of Staff with Michael Douglas as the President in the movie The American President. Continuing such roles he has played a politician several times before as John F. Kennedy, Robert F. Kennedy and John Dean, as a psychotic Senate hopeful aspiring to the U.S Presidency in the film version of Stephen King’s The Dead Zone, and as narrator of Olive Stone’s JFK. The fictional, liberal Democratic President Josiah Bartlet, who moves through The West Wing as a functional archive of the American political discourse, is frequently compared to a real President and termed as “folksy” by Newsweek (Chang 1999, 81) and “bimbo-less Bill Clinton” by Progressive (McKissack 2000, 39). As Donnalyn Pompper writes, “He is an elite individual, well-educated Nobel laureate in Economics, self-professed ‘leader of the free world’ with the code name POTUS, who unashamedly entered a room booming, “I am the Lord, your God” in the very first episode of the show”(28).

Following this overview of the series and introduction to my project, my thesis will proceed with a review of relevant literature, chapters on each of the four critical
categories established by Kellner, and a concluding chapter that builds on that analysis to advance an argument about the overall ideological framework of the series, including and important category treated with detailed attention in *The West Wing* but not addressed by Kellner. The first part of the literature review in Chapter Two will focus on the history of cultural studies starting with how culture is defined. Following the definition of cultural studies, the next chapter will examine the evolution of cultural studies by focusing on the development of the Frankfurt School, the British Cultural Studies tradition known as the Birmingham School, and relevant postmodern/poststructuralist theory.
Chapter Two

Literature Review

Culture, in a broad anthropological sense, refers to any expressive activity contributing to social learning. Stuart Hall defines culture as, “the actual, grounded terrain of practices, representations, languages and customs of any specific historical society” as well as “the contradictory forms of ‘common sense’ which have taken root in and helped to shape popular life”(26). Forty years ago, when Raymond Williams wrote that there was no academic subject that allowed him to ask the questions he was interested in—questions concerning how culture and society, democracy and the individual choice interrelate-- he was talking about is the anti-discipline of cultural studies. Cultural studies, as Nick Couldry points out, can be seen as an expanding space for “sustained rigorous and self-reflexive empirical research into the massive, power-laden complexity of contemporary culture” (2). The literature establishing television studies as a field of inquiry and cultural studies as, for the lack of a better word, a mode of inquiry also functions as a foundation for and justification of my thesis as a scholarly work.

Defining Cultural Studies

The term cultural studies was coined by Richard Hoggart in 1964 when he founded the Birmingham Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies. As Lata Mani writes in her essay Cultural Theory, Colonial Texts: Reading Eyewitness Accounts of Widow Burning, in its utopian moments, cultural studies sometimes imagines “a location where the new politics of difference-racial, sexual, cultural, transnational-can combine and be articulated in all their dazzling plurality”(1). Lawrence Grossberg defines cultural studies
as, “an interdisciplinary, transdisciplinary and sometimes counter-disciplinary field that operates in the tension between its tendencies to embrace both a broad anthropological and a more narrowly humanistic conception of culture” (2). Having grown out of the analyses of modern industrial societies, this field of study has rejected the exclusive equation of culture with high culture, arguing that all forms of cultural production need to be studied in relation to other cultural practices and to social and historical structures. Paul Willis defines culture as, “the very material of our daily lives, the bricks and mortar of our most commonplace understandings” (185). Clearly, this way of defining culture includes television, which has become ubiquitous in contemporary American life. Cultural studies has also identified the ways in which media works to privilege certain ideologies and discourses over others, along with identifying how social locations work to privilege some textual interpretations over others, illuminating what constitutes dominant, negotiated and oppositional meanings if cultural practice (Lembo, 55).

Cultural studies is considered a distinctive epistemological approach that happens when we stop thinking about culture as a particularly valued text and look upon it as a broad process where each person has an equal right to be heard and to have their reflections about culture valued. Representing this space of equality, actual culture involves a concentration, not the dispersal of voices. Cultural studies draws from whatever fields are necessary to produce the knowledge needed for a particular project. Richard Johnson suggests that in response to the pressures to define cultural studies, it can be seen as a kind of process, an alchemy for producing useful knowledge about the broad domain of human culture (7). As Hall writes:
Popular culture…is not at all, as we sometimes think of it, the arena where we find who we really are, the truth of our experience. It is an area that is profoundly mythic…it is there that we discover and play with the identifications of ourselves, where we are imagined, where we are represented. Not only to the audiences out there who do not get the message, but to ourselves for the first time (22).

From the time it has evolved, cultural studies has been looked upon as an engaging set of disciplines that can be used to address relevant issues about contemporary society and culture (Hall, Hobson, Lowe and Willis, 17). The study of culture as pointed out by Keith Tester, is a valuable, exciting and necessary enterprise which has been specifically concerned with the examination of media and the texts created by the media (4). The purpose of cultural studies, as John Storey points out, is not to examine that culture which is defined in a narrow sense such as objects of aesthetic excellence. Instead, cultural studies is engaged in the study of that culture which can be understood as the texts and practices of everyday life (2).

Cultural studies primarily examines and contextualizes culture in terms of power. The relations of power (whether driven by economics, politics, social hierarchy, or other forms of social discrimination) affects who is represented and in what way, who speaks and who is silent, what counts as culture and what does not. Having achieved sufficiently wide popular recognition, including some ridicule by the media and renunciation by the press, cultural studies is now regarded as the successor of poststructuralism, postmodernism, and political correctness. In terms of its position as a crossroads for the
exchange of ideas from different fields, cultural studies seeks to rethink the received truths and remake the inherited frameworks in order to build a new consciousness. Grossberg and Janice Radway, in the editorial statement introducing the journal *Cultural Studies* state, “Cultural studies is committed to the radically contextual, historically specific character, not only of cultural practices but also of the production of knowledge within cultural studies itself”(3). Jenifer Slack speaks of cultural studies as “an ongoing process of rearticulating texts, that is, of examining and intervening in the changing ensemble of forces (or articulations) that create and maintain identities that have real concrete effects”(126). As Martin Baker and Anne Beezer had already stated a decade ago, “if the publications of histories of a discipline is a sign of its coming of age, then cultural studies has undoubtedly emerged from adolescence into maturity”(3). Cultural studies proponents of all sorts, stemming from Hoggart’s (1957) original analysis of working-class discourse, Raymond Williams’ (1958) culture-and-society perspective, neo-Marxist theories of culture and feminist approaches to culture, has contended that culture is not an undifferentiated system that serves to integrate society, instead it's a region of serious contest and conflict over meaning (Agger, 9).

The methodology of cultural studies was ambiguous from the beginning. In the words of Grossberg, cultural studies method “can best be seen as a bricolage-- a choice of practice that is pragmatic, strategic and self-reflective” (2). At Birmingham, the central goal was “to enable people to understand what [was] going on and especially to provide ways of thinking, strategies for survival, and resources for resistance (Hall, 22). Cultural studies was from the very beginning interested in knowledge and ideas as a part of what Michel Foucault later called the “plentitude of the possible, as culture, knowledge,
theory, ideas and-after Foucault- power itself, were not scarce at all, but plentiful, and part of the project of cultural studies was to study and practice not just the traditional aesthetics and pursuits of the governors, but to include in and as culture as much as possible, indeed everything-the whole ‘way of life’ of a people” (Williams, 20). As Hall has written, “Cultural Studies is not one thing, it has never been one thing” (11).

Grossberg, a preeminent cultural studies scholar, explains that cultural studies is “driven by its attempt to respond to history, to what matters in the world of political struggle” (22). The task of the cultural studies scholar is to analyze and identify the agents and the agencies (economic, cultural and political) that construct the configuration of everyday life, specific positions within it and the relation between these and the larger formations. As Julia Wood points out, the primary goal is to bring a critical perspective to bear on the dominant structures of a society and on how those structures affect political and material lives of members of a culture, especially those who are not in the mainstream (283). The work of cultural studies can include the early work of Richard Hoggart (1966), the encoding/decoding model of Stuart Hall (1975), the ethnographic studies of Willis (1978) or McRobbie(1991), Morley’s television research (1994, 1986 and 1990) or the revisions of the hegemonic model as suggested by John Fiske (1987).

The cultural theory that Douglas Kellner refers to has been influenced by the Frankfurt school, British Cultural studies and postmodern/post-structuralist theory. The Frankfurt school inaugurated the critical studies of mass communication and culture and developed an early model of cultural studies. The models of cultural studies range from neo-Marxist models developed by Lukacs, Gramsci, Bloch, and the Frankfurt school in the 1930s to the feminist and psychoanalytic cultural studies that follow. As Kellner
points out, cultural studies operates with a transdisciplinary conception that draws on social theory, economics, politics, history, communication studies, literary and cultural theory, philosophy and other theoretical discourses (27). One of the common myths associated with cultural studies is that this field of study is associated primarily with popular culture. Although popular culture has been an important constituent of cultural studies, this field of study is accompanied by an examination of specific cultural practices and interrogates the mutual determination of popular belief and other discursive formations. Cultural studies is an academic discipline that combines political economy, communication, sociology, literary theory, media theory, film and video studies, cultural anthropology, philosophy, museum studies and art criticism to study cultural phenomena across different societies.

**The Frankfurt School**

The Frankfurt school is a school of neo-Marxist critical theory, social research and philosophy, principally associated with social thought and refers to a group of German-American theorists who developed powerful analyses of the changes in the western capitalist societies that occurred since the Marxist theory. This school was a result of the defeat of the Central European Revolutions and is seen as a response to the need felt by the Left wing intellectuals to reappraise Marxist theory. Starting off as a center for the examination of Marxist theory, the key players of this school maintained an ambiguous relationship with the mainstream Western Marxism, starting from the early works of Max Horkheimer in the 1930s to the writings of Jurgen Habermas (Bottomore, 7). This group emerged at the Institut fur Sozialforschung (Institute for Social Research) in the late 1920s and early 1930s with Max Horkheimer, T.W.Adorno, Herbert Marcuse,
Leo Lowenthal and Eric Fromm responsible for creating the critical social theories, stressing the importance of mass culture and communication in terms of social reproduction and domination. In the 1930s, the Frankfurt school was successful in developing a critical and transdisciplinary approach to cultural and communication studies. The critical approach to cultural studies combines the political economy of media, analyzes texts and looks into the social and ideological effects of along with audience reception studies pertaining to the social and ideological effects of mass culture and communications (Kellner 1989 and 1995, 13). Critical theory as David Rasmussen defines it, “is a metaphor for a certain kind of theoretical orientation which owes its origins to Kant, Hegel and Marx, its systematization to Horkheimer and his associates at the Institute for Social Research in Frankfurt, and its development to successors, particularly the group led by Jurgen Habermas, who have sustained it under various redefinitions to the present day” (Rasmussen, 1).

The history of the Frankfurt school was marked by four distinct periods. The initial developments came between 1923 and 1933 when the research in the school was not inspired by any particular Marxist thought and was very varied. The first director of the Institute, Carl Gruenberg, was closely related in outlook to the Austro-Marxists and placed, too much emphasis on the empirical nature of research. Studies in the first phase of the school were concerned with the ability of capitalism to destroy the conditions of critical and revolutionary political consciousness. The second era of the school, from 1933 to 1950 in North America, was marked by a period of exile when the distinctive ideas of a neo-Hegelian critical theory was recognized as the guiding principle of the School’s activities. With the appointment of Horkheimer as the director of the Institute in
July 1930, the Frankfurt school came to recognize philosophy as the primary guiding thought in place of history or economics. This tendency was reinforced with the entry of Marcuse in the school in 1932 followed by Adorno in 1938, when the leading members of the school under Horkheimer’s direction elaborated their views in a more systematic way and the school developed a distinctive school of thought (Bottomore, 13).

With the return of the Institute in Frankfurt in 1950, the Frankfurt school began to exert an important influence upon the German social thought; the idea of “critical theory” was also defined during this period. This period of the Frankfurt school was marked by great intellectual and political influence, reaching its peak in the late 1960s with the growth of the radical student movement. With Marxism as the principal focus of the Institute during this period, Adorno and Marcuse emerged as the leading theorists of the Frankfurt school at this time. This was also when the critical theorists, recognizing the change that capitalism underwent, attempted to define the concept of reason in the new historical period. Horkheimer and Adorno chose to concentrate on reexamination of the foundations of critical theory while Marcuse analyzed the structural changes of the labor process. This was reflected in Adorno’s work *Negative Dialectics*, in which he defined dialectics and suggested that in striving for identity, the subject almost always devours the object. With the dialectic becoming more abstract and the revolutionary working class coming to an end, the focus of the Frankfurt school moved from the society to the individual subject in the 1970s. With the death of Adorno in 1969 and the passing away of Horkheimer in 1973, the Frankfurt school of thought departed quickly from the original Marxist school of thought to the work of Jurgen Habermas and delved into the reappraisals of Marx’s theory of history and of modern capitalism (Bottomore, 13).
Habermas’s work takes into account rationality, the human subject, democratic socialism and the dialectical method to draw parallels between the Marxian social theory and the individualist assumptions of critical rationalism.

The term “culture industry” was coined by the Frankfurt school to mark the process of industrialization of a mass-produced culture and the commercial imperatives which were driving the system. The original idea of the culture industries evolved in the mid-twentieth century in Europe where the writers looked upon culture industries as critical components of mass manipulation and propaganda (Hartley, 91). The culture industries were also accused of manipulation where they were held responsible for creating and spreading pro-capitalist ideologies and pernicious propaganda messages. Having moved from the Nazi Germany to the United States, a rise of media culture that involved film, popular music, radio, television and other forms of mass culture, was experienced by the Frankfurt school (Wiggershaus, 1994). Finding themselves in exile in the United States where the commercial entertainment was controlled by big corporations, two of the key theorists of the Frankfurt school described the “culture industry” to explain the industrialization and commercialization of culture under the capitalist relations of production (Kellner, 1972). These theorists became the first to develop a systematic approach for analyzing and criticizing the mass-mediated culture by a critical social theory. The critical theorists were also responsible for analyzing all mass-mediated cultural artifacts in industrial production with the commodities belonging to the culture industries exhibiting the same features as other products of mass production: commodification and standardization.
Cultural studies is a term used to legitimize people’s fascination with mass culture, granting them academic authority in order to avoid using terms like critique of ideology (Agger, 5). Theorists of the Frankfurt school refused to believe that Marxist critique could be exempted from social and economic determination and recognized that theory itself is a cultural and political activity. According to the Marxist view, an understanding of culture cannot be built by the subjective ideas of age or by an understanding of the creative works, individual or mass, but by paying attention to the objective economic forces which cause such works. As Scott Lash writes,

“In the work of Hall, Heibige and McRobbie, popular culture came to the fore…what Gramsci gave to this was the importance of consent and culture. If the fundamental Marxist saw power in terms of class versus class, then Gramsci gave to us a question of class alliance. The rise of cultural studies itself was based on the decline of the prominence of fundamental class-versus-class politics” (69).

One of the first Marxist thinkers to pay serious attention to culture in a way that suggested the relative autonomy of literature as well as the notion that art serves as an important realm of social and political investigation was Antonio Gramsci. The Frankfurt school’s revision of Marxism involved not abandonment of his dialectical method or political utopianism, rather a fresh empirical analysis of the structural contradictions and crisis tendencies of capitalism (Agger, 57). Refusing to believe that the Marxist critique was exempt from social and economic determination, theorists of the
Frankfurt school stressed the fact that theory in itself is a cultural and political activity. The Frankfurt theorists combine cultural and social theory and this has been difficult to accept for the orthodox Marxists who not only refuse to grant relative autonomy to culture but also fail to integrate the cultural and political analysis in a dialectical way (Agger, 59). One of the most famous discussions of mass culture was reflected in Walter Benjamin’s essay titled “Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” in which he discussed the social and political consequences of the times when technology turned cultural artifacts into objects meant for reproduction and distribution.

In the 1930s Horkheimer developed his concept of the role of philosophy, primarily by critiquing the modern positivism or empiricism and claimed that “neo-romantic metaphysics and radical positivism alike have their roots in the present sad state of the middle class” (Herder & Herder, 140). Horkheimer’s criticism of positivism as a theory of knowledge is based on three points. First, it treats human beings as mere facts and objects within a scheme of mechanical determinism. Second, it sees the world as immediately given in experience without making any distinctions between essence and appearance. And finally, there is a clear distinction between fact and value, separating knowledge from human interests. Horkheimer’s argument of positivism was best expressed in his essay “Traditional and Critical theory,” which is known as the founding charter of the Frankfurt school.

The Frankfurt school of cultural studies propagates the view that mass culture and communications are placed at the center of leisure activity, and they function as important agents of socialization, mediators of political reality, which makes it essential for them to be viewed as major institutions of contemporary societies with numerous
economic, political, cultural and social effects (Kellner, 29). The scholars of the Frankfurt school were clearly the pioneers among the neo-Marxian groups to read into the effects of mass culture and analyze how the rise of the consumer class was instrumental in bringing about a political change. Focusing on technology and culture in the article, “Some Social Implications of Modern Technology,” Herbert Marcuse said in 1941, that the technology in a contemporary era comprises an entire mode of organizing and changing social relationships and acts as an instrument for domination and control (414). The technological and capitalistic advancements of the American society also faced much fire from the Frankfurt school theorists because they believed that the American popular culture was highly ideological and tended to fuel the interests of American capitalism.

The Frankfurt school has suggested that the commodification of culture in late capitalism ensures that the production of cultural artifacts follows in exchange for money. This school of thought was promoted by the works of Benjamin, who in his article “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” argued that the mass reproduction of photography, film, recordings, and publications takes away the originality of the work along with the “aura” of the work of art (Agger, 62). In trying to promote a radical, cultural and media politic, Benjamin also recognized that film has the capability to create newer forms of ideology by the use of techniques like close-ups that fetishized certain stars or images employing the technology of cinema (Kellner, 15).

The Frankfurt school has been able to combine cultural and social theories with the effect that the theorists of this school took popular culture seriously and looked upon mass culture as an important venue for political analysis and critique. The Frankfurt school theory of the culture industries signifies a major historical shift, representing an
era where mass consumption and culture was responsible for creating a consumer society based on the homogenous needs and desires for mass-based products along with a mass based society based on social organization and homogeneity (Kellner, 15). The Frankfurt school, in its original form as a school of Marxism or sociology, has now been reformed to resemble a more structuralist school of thought (Bottomore, 76).

This school has suggested that culture has some narcotic or diversionary properties that dehistorize culture in a crucial system-serving way (Agger, 68). This is in line with the argument of Horkheimer and Adorno that this process is considered to be a one sided approach in which culture is consumed passively. The Frankfurt school approach was able to overcome the chasm between communication studies and cultural studies using the framework of critical social theory (Hartley, 90). Exposing the inadequacies of the quantitative methods in order to analyze the relations between texts and audiences, along with investigating the relationships between the media industries, state and capitalist economies, the Frankfurt critique of cultural studies serves the needs of the dominant corporate interests, playing a major role in ideological reproduction, and as Kellner points out “inculcates individuals into the dominant system of needs, thought and behavior”(16). The critical theory developed by the Frankfurt school focused on the meanings, methods and the inherent limitations of the very notion of critique in a contemporary society (Surber, 128). What the Frankfurt school of cultural studies concentrated, as an area of study was mass culture, information industry and art, with the theorists of this school insisting on aesthetic theory as a valid component of cultural studies. Their argument picked up on the fact that the same critical method can find application in a variety of cultural products and practices. This was radically different
from the British school of cultural studies where the theorists focused more on the pop-cultural artifacts, which were constantly addressed by media studies and film theory (Agger, 70).

**British Cultural Studies**

The development of the Frankfurt school through the 1920s to the 1970s made significant contributions for the terrain of media culture. Following up on those developments, the British cultural studies emerged in the 1960s with an initial Marxian approach for studying culture. The primary influence for this school of cultural studies came from Hoggart in 1957 and later from Hall, who was responsible for guiding the substantive development of British Cultural studies and creating the seminal Encoding/Decoding model. The Birmingham locus for British Cultural studies was influenced by the work of Hoggart and included historical work by E.P.Thomson and Raymond Williams, known as the founder of the culture and society approach to cultural analysis (Agger, 73). The very first phase of the British cultural studies tradition can be characterized as a direct response to the literary studies, which rose to prominence following the works of literary critics Hoggart, Williams and E.P.Thomson, all of whom were in a way responsible for coming up with the approach that can be termed as culturalism (Surber, 236).

The very first study of culture as a “way of life” happened in the late 1950s and the early 1960s, conducted primarily by the British critics and was strongly influenced by Marxism and the US Anthropological school of Malinowski and others. Hall, Paul Willis, Dick Hebige, Tony Jefferson and Angela McRobbie created an international intellectual movement where Marxist methods of analysis were employed to explore the relationship
between the various cultural forms and the political economy. This is when cultural studies was looking for culture in the places it had never been looked for before. In terms of time, this meant that there was an inherent need to find cultural studies in demographic locations other than those of the rich. So, the working class culture, women’s culture, youth culture, gay and lesbian culture, post colonial culture, third world culture and the culture of everyday life formed the basis of all discovery for this field of study. With the decline of the British working class in the 1970s, the shift in loyalty from the Labour Party to the Conservative Party was explained primarily in terms of cultural politics by Stuart Hall and other Marxist theorists. Richard Lee writes that, when the Labour party came to power in July 1945, their election manifesto of “Let us Face the Future” argued that permanent social reform and security “could not be built on rotten economic foundation and that for labour to provide the extensive social reforms to which they would be pledged it was necessary and essential that industry should be socialized” (12). As Eric Hobsbawm writes, “An entire mode of life became obsolete,” and although not particularly to their taste, “a marked emphasis on culture was probably the most important innovation in the newspapers which appealed to the middle class in the post-war period” (280).

Forced by the theoretical challenge of the new generation of the New Left, Hoggart and Williams revised and changed their positions on this area of study as cultural studies was able to “create more sophisticated analyses of media content...crucially that sense of the immediate pressure to connect cultural analysis to the whole life experiences and situation of working-class people, which the perspective from adult education had enforced, had been lost” (217). At this point in time, culture was considered a product of
the economy, and this was the classic Marxist doctrine of causation. This doctrine implied that productive economic activity in large-scale complex, industrialized societies were responsible for determining what people think and not the other way round. This was the time when the work of Antonio Gramsci and his theory of hegemony came to light. Gramsci’s theory combined culture, society and politics, projecting them as terrains of contestations between different groups and classes. Taking on Gramsci’s theory, many other theorists have attempted to develop a more differentiated concept of ideology which pays more attention to emergent, residual, and hegemonic ideologies within contemporary neo-capitalist or state socialist societies (25). In his most influential work, *The Uses of Literacy*, Richard Hoggart, in describing the roots of the people belonging to the working class pointed out that this healthy looking working class was facing serious threat from the combined forces of the mass culture. This mass culture, he said, “commercially manufactured a manipulative candy-floss wonderland that tended to deaden the formerly affirmative and engaged cultural sensibilities of the working classes” (Surber, 237). Raymond Williams came to define culture as a complex and dynamic set of expressions, which is used by human beings to create sense out of their lived experiences and the historical conditions from which those experiences stem (Surber, 246).

The Birmingham group was able to replicate certain classical positions and theories of the Frankfurt school in their social theory and methodological models for studying cultural studies. The area of study of British Cultural studies included subculture, popular culture, and media studies employing theories of Marxist, post structuralism, feminism and critical race theory along with traditional methodologies like
Sociology and Ethnography. British cultural studies, as Kellner points out, situate culture within a theory of social production and reproduction, specifying the ways that cultural forms served (31). The initial works of Hoggart, Williams and Thomson worked towards preserving the working-class culture from the attacks of mass culture as produced by the culture industries. While Thompson enquired into the history of British working class institutions, Hoggart and Williams attacked the mass culture that was a part of the socialist and working class oriented project (During, 36). Their argument was that the industrial working class can function as a major force of progressive social change and they could also be mobilized and organized to struggle against the inequalities of the existing capitalist societies, striving for a more egalitarian socialist society (Kellner, 15). This school of thought propagated that society can be perceived as a hierarchical set of social relations that is characterized by the oppression of subordinate class, gender, race, ethnic and national strata (Kellner, 31). This is where Gramsci’s theory of hegemony comes into play. Gramsci’s theory of hegemony and counter hegemony forms the basis of this school of cultural studies where the “hegemonic” or ruling social and cultural forms of domination are analyzed to seek “counter hegemonic” forces of resistance and struggle (Kellner, 24). Following Herbert Marcuse’s work in the Frankfurt school, the British cultural studies turned to the youth cultures for creating new forms of opposition and social change. As Jefferson (1976) and Hebige (1979) point out, British cultural studies was able to demonstrate that culture constitutes distinct forms of identity and group membership along with appraising the oppositional potential of different youth subcultures (116).
It is from Gramsci’s theory of hegemony that Douglas Kellner has been able to draw the critical, multicultural and multiperspectival theory of cultural studies, which argues that a cultural critique should specify the contests that are going on, mentioning which groups are fighting, specifying their positions without failing along with the cultural analyst intervening on what is perceived as the more progressive side (Kellner, 101). Marxism has stressed the importance of economic base over the cultural superstructure in determining the “ruling ideas” or “ideology” of any era. As Marx said, “it is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness” (124). Gramsci was the key player who updated the Marxist view of culture and defined it as a key component for political and social control. Following this view, it can be understood that capitalists use force not only to maintain control but also for poking the everyday routine culture of the people. Following Gramsci’s theory, hegemony can be defined as the process in which the subordinates are led to consent to the system which rules them (Fiske, 40). This is achieved when individuals are forced to consent to view the social system and its everyday embodiments as “common sense,” which can be perceived as the self-evidently natural occurrence. Hegemony is the means by which some form of consent can be secured from those who are dominated to the domination under which they live (Ferguson, 20). As Fiske points out, hegemony characterizes social relations as a series of struggles for power (42). According to the Marxist view, an understanding of culture was not possible by the subjective ideas of age or by understanding the creative works which can be individual (art) or mass (entertainment); what is needed is to pay attention to the driving economic forces that are said to cause such works (25). As Scott Lash writes,” in
the work of Hall, Hebige and McRobbie, popular culture came to the fore…what Gramsci gave to this was the importance of consent and culture. If the fundamental Marxists saw power in terms of class versus class, then Gramsci gave to us a question of class alliance. The rise of cultural studies itself was based on the decline of the prominence of fundamental class-versus-class politics” (69). Gramsci also points out that, although the leading group in any social formation might be willing to make certain sacrifices in relation to the group over which, hegemony is exercised, in order to maintain what he describes as a “certain compromise equilibrium,” economic domination must necessarily be based on the decisive function exercised by the leading group in the decisive nucleus of economic activity (Gramsci, 161).

Developing through the 1970s and the 1980s, British cultural studies adopted feminism, critical race theory, gay and lesbian theory, postmodern theory as its defining theoretical modes. Following the work of Gramsci, Stuart Hall emphasized the use of language as an important component of operation within the framework of power, institutions and politics/economics (Woodward, 3). Culture, as Hall argued, is not so much a set of things but a set of practices (Hall, 2). According to him, culture is concerned with the production and exchange of meanings between the members of a society or a group, and it is dependent on the participants in order to interpret and make sense of the world in a broad way. Hall’s reception theory focuses on opposition on the part of the audience and explains that some readers accept a given meaning of a text while others are free not to do so. With Hall’s leadership, the school of British Cultural studies was able to expand its theoretical base and research agendas along with reaching out a wider audience of influence. Hall’s theoretical approach, which is known as
structuralism, rejects the traditional Marxist view and stresses on the structural and ideological features of culture as the major components of human praxis (Surber, 240).

Though following different traditions, both the Frankfurt school and the school of British cultural studies focused on ideology as the pivotal part of critical cultural studies. Culture, in both these schools of thought, was considered to be a form of resistance and a mode of ideological reproduction and hegemony (Kellner, 23). The British school of cultural studies stresses on defining cultural studies in a broad way and sees culture as not only a base of high-cultural works and knowledge but also as Ben Agger points out, “an anthropological ensemble of learning and lived experience that makes us human” (78).

**Poststructural and Postmodern approaches to cultural studies**

An increased emphasis on audiences, and how they create their own meanings out of the cultural texts, marked what was called the postmodern period of the cultural studies. The postmodern turn in the recent social and cultural theory is party a response to the mandarinism of modernism, both aesthetic and critical. It is very difficult to associate cultural studies with a single theoretical paradigm since it has evolved from different theories and philosophies like Marxism, phenomenology, hermeneutics, poststructuralism and postmodernism. As per most art historians, ‘modernism’ was a movement that began in the late nineteenth century, coming to an end in the 1960s. The use of the term ‘postmodernism’ is used to characterize the type of society and culture that has developed in the western societies since the 1970s and into the beginning of the twenty-first century. Poststructuralism refers to the theory of knowledge and language associated with the work of Jacques Derrida and this theory suggests that meaning of words are largely embedded in the use of language itself (Kellner, 23). Postmodernism can be seen both as
a symptom and a powerful cultural image of the swing away from the conceptualization of global culture less in terms of alleged homogenizing processes (e.g., theories which present cultural imperialism, Americanization and mass consumer culture as a proto-universal culture) and more in terms of the diversity, variety and richness of popular and local discourses, codes and practices which resist and play-back systemicity and order (Featherstone, 2). As Philip Rayner, Peter Wall and Stephen Kruger point out,

“Postmodernism is also said to reflect modern society’s insecurities and uncertainties concerning identity, history, progress and truth, and the break up of those traditional agencies like religion, the family or, perhaps to a lesser extent, class which helped identify and shape who we are and our place in the world” (15).

Although the postmodern cultural studies lack the transformational intent of German critical theory, it has made cultural studies possible by actually engaging with the particular texts and discourses. Postmodern discourse theory, beginning with Derrida, crucially liberates Neo-Frankfurt cultural studies, from the high abstractions of Adorno’s aesthetic theory, which became a model of critical theory’s cultural studies (Agger, 46). Poststructuralism is able to reconstruct the process of meaning, with Derrida’s argument that “meaning is forever elusive and incomplete in the sense that language can never perfectly convey what is meant by the language user”(Agger, 93). The term postmodernism includes the works of French theorists such as Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Jacques Lacan, Julia Kristeva and Roland Barthes who in the 1980s adopted a “deconstructive” approach to culture and suggested that all readings must be con-textual.
The primary goal of post structural cultural criticism is the creation of new texts along with producing new cultural artifacts. As Kellner points out, “the terms modern and postmodern are used to cover a bewildering diversity of cultural artifacts, social phenomena and theoretical discourses” where the concept of postmodernism works “with constant scrutiny, clarification and criticism” (43).

Kellner, in talking about media culture says that the various forms of media culture induce individuals to identify with the dominant social and political ideologies, positions and representations, which are often highly pleasurable. The use of sights sounds and various other strategies induce audiences into identifying with specific views, attitudes, feelings and positions (3). Media culture is the driving force behind the economy, generating profits leading to a reproduction of the consumer society. The concept of the “society of the spectacle,” which was developed by the French theorist Guy Debord and his comrades in the Situationist International was able to exert major influences of on the contemporary theories of society and culture (Tester, 1). This is similar to Frankfurt school’s concept of “one-dimensional society” where the moment of the spectacle is where the media consumption makes up for total occupation of an individual’s social life (Marcuse, 1964; Horkheimer and Adorno, 1972). As Michael J.Wolf points out that an “entertainment economy” comprises of the combination of entertainment and business and the entertainment industry in America is a $480 billion industry, with consumers spending more on having fun than on clothes or health care (4).

Kellner’s theory of critical cultural studies consists of a critical, multicultural and multiperspectival approach that analyzes the relationships of domination and oppression, delves into the methods of stereotyping and how these groups struggle to fight the
distorted representations in order to produce positive representations. The critical multicultural approach considers the intersection of gender, race, sexuality and social class and other determinants of identity as principal components of culture. There is also an urgent need to detect sexism, racism, classism, homophobia and other tendencies to create individual identities (96). The critical perspectives towards culture have always been engaged in attacking oppression and domination and this has been proven true throughout the history of cultural studies with the theories of the Frankfurt school, British cultural studies along with certain forms of post-structuralism and multiculturalism.

Critical cultural and social theories recognize that a contemporary society and its culture functions as a contested terrain where the full political and ideological dimensions of the texts of media culture can be grasped by viewing them from the perspectives of gender, race, sexuality and social class (98). Critical cultural studies has been able to adopt various norms, values and strategies that enable it to criticize and analyze the various media texts and artifacts. This in turn, has enabled the critical media cultural studies, as Kellner points out, “to develop an oppositional politics that is aimed at producing a progressive turn in contemporary culture and society through contributing to the development of a counter hegemony to the conservative hegemony of the past few years” (22).

Defining a text, Fiske points out that a text functions as a point of conflict between the forces which produce them and their modes of reception (Fiske, 14). Codes are highly complex patterns of associations that all members of a society and culture learn over a period of time and they carry these rules and understandings over to their exposures to the different mass-mediated cultures (Berger, 30). Umberto Eco has talked
about aberrant decoding which is something that happens when different people apply different codes to the mass mediated messages, leading to several different interpretations of the same message. As Eco says,

“Codes and sub codes are applied to the message [read text] in the light of a general framework of cultural references, which constitutes the receiver’s patrimony of knowledge: his ideological, ethical, religious standpoints, his psychological attitudes, his tastes, his value systems, etc.”(115).

For John Fiske, the elements of narrative function with five codes, as Barthes points out. These are: symbolic code, semic code, referential code, the code of actions and the hermeneutic code. The symbolic code is responsible for creating the fundamental binary oppositions that are important for every cultural forms. Termed as most important by Levi- Strauss, this code functions as the antithesis on which the narrative has been founded and includes masculine-feminine, good-evil, nature-culture, etc (142). The semic code seeks to construct meaning out of character, objects or settings. “Semes” or the basic units of meaning in a text serve as the nominal category for creating a character. A “figure” bears resemblances to the character roles as defined by Propp, but they are also different, as their creation does not depend on the needs of the narrative but the needs of the culture to which they belong (143). The referential code is where the text refers to the reality in an objective manner, stressing on cultural knowledge. The knowledge of the real as we know it helps us make sense of the reality and constitutes or sense of life. As O’Sullivan points out that “reality is the product of discourse” and “is also intertextual”
The code of actions is constructed from Barthes concept of structuralism, which suggests that our understanding of an action in any particular narrative comes from our having experienced similar actions in other narratives. Whatever narrative experience we have is an amalgamation of the details arranged in generic categories of actions such as, murder, rendezvous, theft, perilous mission, to name a few (Fiske, 143). The final code, which is the hermeneutic code, progresses with the desire of a closure or an end and is responsible for controlling the pace and narrative style. It does so by controlling the flow of information that the reader uses to make sense of the narrative and thus can also be called the “motor of the narrative” (Barthes, 61). Watching television is a much more interactive process than sitting through a film or browsing through a novel as the television narratives are more open to negotiation (Fiske, 147). Television functions as the medium where an active audience is involved in deconstructing and opposing the forces of closure that are produced within the structures of the narrative.

**Television Studies and Cultural Studies**

The recent media culture, comprising of stories and images, uses sights and sounds to play on a range of emotions. This interplay of the technical conventions, codes and rules pertaining to television, is specifically created and produced to cater to the needs of a mass audience. This media culture, as Douglas Kellner points out, aims at a large audience, thus it must resonate to current themes and concerns, and is highly topical, providing hieroglyphics of contemporary social life. Media culture, being the dominant culture, has replaced the other forms of high culture as the center of cultural attention and impact for a large number of people. As Todd Gitlin points out, television gives us a distant view, bringing images of the unknown into the household, letting fresh
truths into otherwise closed rooms (3). Television needs criticism and understanding and is seen as the intersection of force-fields like economic imperatives, cultural traditions, and political impositions. Gitlin argues that, television is a screen on which the absurdities and abominations of our politics and morals are displayed in living color (6). Television, as Robert C. Allen, constitutes one of the most complex systems that help us create different experiences of the world around us (2). Although it seems very normal, television actually does not reflect the world in very simple ways. Instead, it helps construct representations of the world based on what is called conventions. These conventions operate in such a way that makes it imperative for television to be read critically. Cultural Studies as a diagnostic critique, as Kellner points out, is “concerned with in what media spectacle tells us about contemporary society and culture, in developing readings that illuminate the present age and in decoding signs of times that allow us to grasp better the defining characteristics, novelties and conflicts of the contemporary era”(27). With media and culture playing such an important role in modern contemporary lives, it has become necessary to understand the cultural environment we survive in.

As Jonathan Culler writes, “if we are to understand our social and cultural world, we must think not of independent objects but of symbolic structures, systems of relations which, by enabling objects and actions to have meaning, create a human universe” (11). In comparing the world of television with the genre of Elizabethan dramas and theatres, John Fiske and John Hartley argue that comparing dramas composed in that period for television cannot be considered fair because television is essentially the product of “modern industrial society” while literature and theatre are the offspring of a society
which differs in structure and organization from the one of which television is a part of (3). Just like every other medium of art, television also functions with its own set of codes which can help in structuring the language of this interactive medium. A code, as Fiske points out, is a rule-governed system of signs, whose rules and conventions are shared by the members of a culture, and this helps in generating and circulating meanings for that culture (Fiske, 183 and O’Sullivan, 1983). All of these codes serve as links between the hierarchical structures of the television such as the producers, and the audiences and also help create meanings in the cultural world in which we live. As Fiske and Hartley point out that, television is “ephemeral, episodic, specific, concrete and dramatic” where meanings from the medium are created by the “juxtaposition of contradictory signs and the logic is oral and visual” (3). Media is looked upon as an active agent of fundamental historical change and media culture is seen as an important terrain of study as they can provide larger than life spectacles complete with special effects and intense sounds.

Television, commercial, conventional or conservative, creates norms, which constitute an everyday experience. A media event, as a point of maximum discursive ability is also a point of maximum turbulence as it invites intervention and motivates audiences to struggle for redirecting some of the currents that flows towards them in terms of every day television viewing (Fiske, 8). Audiences are able to do some kinds of perceptual editing when they watch a TV show, projecting their own viewpoint upon the performance. However, a major part of such editing comes from the conditioning that has audiences have done as a result of the previously internalized images which are also creations of the same mass media. Some of the images distributed by the television
medium helps in legitimizing the hegemonic ideological system with images and themes that “help propagate private enterprise, personal affluence, individual acquisitiveness, consumerism, super patriotism, imperialism, racial stereotyping and sexism, rarely attacking the established institutions of wealth and power, accepting the existing class structure and prevailing distribution of economic of wealth as the best of all possible social arrangements” (Parenti, 209).

John Fiske has argued that all cultural commodities including television circulates in two simultaneous economies: the financial as well as the cultural. The financial economy concerns itself with the exchange value while the cultural economy is focused on the use of the medium and is expressed in terms of meanings, pleasures and social identities (Storey, 25). The work of Adorno and Horkheimer contains many profound and carefully crafted arguments that analyze various forms of mass culture, including television, as an ideological form of capitalist domination (Lembo, 8). Theorists have analyzed the social, as opposed to the persuasive power of television, with the social power arising from the political, economic, technological and discursive transformations that have characterized the rise of advanced capitalism in the West. For Lazarsfeld and Merton, the mass media serves as a “structure of social control”, integrating individuals into the culture of industrial capitalism.

The mass media, according to Lazarsfeld and Merton, “has taken on the job of rendering the mass public conformative to the social and economic status quo” (558). Lazarsfeld and Merton have also identified the unintended cultural consequences of the consolidation of elite power in the mass media and television does so by sanctioning and enforcing social norms. Television confers a status on people, places and policies by
providing them with adequate coverage and it can also do the opposite by removing people from more active forms of involvement in their own lives (Lembo, 19). Todd Gitlin has also pointed out that the preference given by the mass media to particular ideologies, the shaping of public agendas, the mobilization of support networks for the policies of political parties and state has added to the institutional power of the mass media. According to Gitlin, the repetition of certain “ideation structures” is indicative of the media’s preference for ideas and values that harmonize with elite interests and these structures “work to solidify ordinary people’s opinions and attitudes into more enduring configurations of consciousness, this is what can be termed as ideology” (Lembo, 20). Fiske, using Barthes’ work has noted that the intertextual is the “prime site of culture” and “intertextual relations are so pervasive that our culture consists of a complex web of intertextuality, in which all texts refer finally to each other and not to reality” (115). The works of Adorno are indispensable for television studies because he has demonstrated how the objective structure of television is tied to the logic of producing and distributing commodities, that result in the transformations of story telling conventions and their repetitions serve as crucial determinants of television’s power. Lazarsfeld and Merton, Gitlin, Adorno and the Frankfurt school serve as three examples for the socializing theories of media and the power and culture that take shape as a result of media.

The work of media theorists like Kellner (1990), Miller (1988), Postman (1985) and Meyerowitz is associated with cultural studies in the sense that Kellner analyzes the political economy and regulatory environment of contemporary commercial television, Miller talks about the inherently limited horizons of television programming and Meyerowitz discusses the notion of the loss of a sense of place resulting from the more
subtle and pervasive effects of media imagery in people’s lives (Lembo, 25). Functionalists, critical theorists and Gramscian-inspired Marxists have correctly emphasized the importance of social structures and processes that have led to the growth of mass media and also shaped the meaning it has created in people’s lives. John Fiske’s critical analyses of media imagery and audiences constitutes an integral part of cultural studies as it builds on the developments in the field of cultural studies to draw out the sociological significance of discourse by discussing its workings as a text. As Lembo points out that Fiske’s account of television is quite comprehensive in terms of “realism of the medium that personalizes the social and historical circumstances of human action and the genre of story telling including patterns of plot, characterization and narration that lend predictability to the unfolding of action in socially acceptable ways (Lembo, 64). Sociologist Herbert Gans (1974) has effectively summarized the political ideology that underlies the historical mass society/popular culture debate and the reason it remains important for us in the following words:

“The so-called mass culture critique is important because it is concerned with far more than media fare and consumer goods. It is really about the nature of the good life, and thus about the purpose of life in general, particularly outside the work role. It is also about which culture and whose culture should dominate in society, and represent it as the societal or national culture in the competition between contemporary societies and in the historical record of cultures or civilizations. As such, the mass culture critique
is an attack by one element in society against another: by the cultured against the uncultured, the educated against the uneducated, the sophisticated against the unsophisticated, the more affluent against the less affluent, and the cultural experts against the laity. In each case, the former criticize the latter for not living up to their own standard of the good life (4).

The textual analysis of cultural studies combines formalist analysis with critiques of how cultural meanings convey specific ideologies of gender, race, class, sexuality, nation and other ideological dimensions. A multicultural approach to cultural studies stresses the importance of analyzing the dimensions of class, race and ethnicity, and gender and sexual preferences within the texts of media culture, along with understanding how the audiences read and interpret media culture.

Cultural studies is arguably the most sophisticated of critical approaches for studying culture that focuses on analyzing cultural practices and power relationships across a wide variety of social setting, both contemporary and historical. Throughout the history of cultural studies, the substantive interests and political concerns guiding the work of the analysts of this school of thought have changed, reflecting the simultaneous and successive influence of neo-Marxism, structuralism, semiotics, feminism and the very recent, postcolonial and poststructuralist perspectives. As a result of this, the initial approach of cultural studies focusing on capitalism and class-based identities have been expanded to include studies of patriarchal power relations, racial and ethnic divisions, shaping cultural studies as the innovative field of study as it is today.
Chapter Three

Methodology

Spanning several substantive arenas, research methodology is comprised of research philosophies, designs, data collection methods, analysis techniques, and reporting methods. In its simplest terms, methodology in the cultural studies tradition can employ a collection of theories, concepts or ideas; it can involve a comparative study of different approaches; or the method may be a de facto critique of individual methods. Referring to the rationale and philosophical assumptions that underlie a particular study, a research methodology helps in identifying the key concepts to be studied and, most importantly, facilitates the categorization of the concepts for individual study. The difference between qualitative and quantitative methodology lies in the fact that although the object may be viewed in the same way, the mode is different. Qualitative methodology’s use depends on the maximum flow of relevant data to examine a text or set of texts contextually, which is essential for developing theories about larger implications of the texts, studies that gain authenticity by persuading or resonating with the readers. The polysemic nature of visual texts emphasizes the need for research methodology that will take into account the various categories that need to be studied to develop a compelling thesis related to the text. Unlike other forms of artistic discourse, television’s looming presence as a popular and artistic medium demands continuous criticism because, at least on one level, it must express dominant cultural perspectives in order to be successful.

In reading media culture politically from a perspective suggested by decades of cultural studies scholarship, it is useful to situate ideological criticism as Douglas Kellner
proposes at the intersection of gender, sexuality, race and class (93). By incorporating a variety of discourses, ideological positions and narrative strategies, the producers of media texts attempt to attract as large an audience as possible to the works they create. What Douglas Kellner argues for is a critical perspective towards culture that articulates the social constitution of the concepts of gender, sexuality, race, and class and, by exploring how these identities are constructed, that examines the larger implications of these representations as they create new and different identities (94). Interpreting culture and society in terms of power relations, domination, and resistance creates the need for a critical social theory that carefully scrutinizes these representations multiperspectivally by using a wide range of textual and critical strategies to interpret, criticize, and deconstruct the artifact under scrutiny. According to John Fiske, television as a part of culture is a crucial part of the social dynamics by which the social structure maintains itself in a constant process of production and reproduction; meanings, popular pleasures, and their circulation are thus part and parcel of the social structure (1).

I will study the television series *The West Wing* using Kellner’s multicultural and multiperspectival theory to classify the show into the categories of gender, race, sexual orientation and class and using John Fiske’s narrative theory to decode each of those categories to be examined. Reading the show both historically and topically, I will watch all of the seasons of the series, and select one or two exemplar episodes to analyze in depth for each of the categories. Given the popularity of the series, it is important to appreciate the intersectionality of these categories to understand how the text critiques and reinforces powerful identity stereotypes. Along with challenging and preserving powerful gender norms and sex roles, *The West Wing* gives out complicated and
polyvalent messages about race, deals with sexual orientation in a limited but provocative way, and defines issues of social class largely by omission. Critical cultural studies not only by provides a clever and close reading of the cultural texts but also advances a critique of the structures and practices of domination and advancing forces of resistance struggling for a more democratic and egalitarian society. According to Kellner, “a multiperspectival cultural approach draws on a wide range of textual and critical strategies to interpret, criticize, and deconstruct the artifact under scrutiny” (98). This concept is derived from Nietzsche’s idea of perspectivism, which holds the belief that all interpretation is necessarily mediated by one’s perspectives and is inevitably laden with presuppositions, values, biases, and limitations. For Nietzsche, “there is only a perspective seeing, only a perspective knowing; and the more affects we allow to speak about one thing, the more complete will ‘our’ concept of this thing, our ‘objectivity’ be”(98).

The high production values of *The West Wing* cost the production unit six million dollars per episode. One of the most creative aspects of the show is the use of “walk and talk” long Steadicam shots, which capture the characters walking down the hallways while engaged in a long conversation. While the characters keep talking, the camera follows them until one of the characters break off, and the remaining one is joined by a new person, while they continue walking. These shots successfully create a fast-paced dynamic atmosphere, replacing the long expository dialogues common to the television genre. Similar aesthetic strategies will form a part of my analysis and discussion of the show in the subsequent chapters where I will pay close attention to plotlines, key visual
and verbal techniques, camera angles, dialogues and the use of music as components of analysis for these categories of study.

In Chapter Four titled “The Politics of Women in the World of Politics,” I will use Kellner’s categorical scheme and Fiske’s narrative theory as a foundation for decoding gender. In presenting a provocative portrayal of the women in the government, this series has strong women characters who occupy supportive subordinate roles while the men consistently dominate the decision making in the White House. All the women are praised and valued but in a gendered context. C.J is admired for her energy and appearance, and Mrs. Landingham is noticed for her faithful dedication to national duty. The dominance of the male perspective on the show clearly demarcates males from females while also offering females as objects of the gaze. As Laura Mulvey notes, “The male protagonist is free to command the stage, a stage of spatial illusion in which he articulates the look and creates the action.” To the extent that the “man controls the film fantasy… [he] also emerges as the representative of power” (51). Using Laura Mulvey’s gaze theory, I will study the character of C.J. Cregg, the White House Press Secretary who eventually goes on to become the White House Chief of Staff. The character of C.J. represents an important site where gender and politics play out. The specific episodes that I will reference in this chapter are “The Women of Qumar” and “Manchester, Part 1.” C.J is highly emotional in a stereotypical manner, especially on issues pertaining to women, but she is also an integral member of the President’s inner circle whose authority is clearly established in the first season of the show. She “spins the White House view to the world, but has little role in deciding that view” (Parry Giles, 12). As Levine points out, “She plays a mouthpiece, not a policy maker, the voice constantly asking the male
team surrounding the President, ‘What do I need to know?’” (52). As Lesley Smith (2000) has pointed out, while The West Wing occasionally “infiltrates” strong women into the President’s team, it “quickly undermines their importance while maintaining their air time, reproducing the contemporary political sleight of hand that recognizes the need for visible female participation, but resists accompanying it with permanent power” (84). Although the depiction of female characters, as Parry Giles points out, in positions of real power and authority deserves applause, the ways in which only women are sexualized, leaving out men, confirms the powerful gender ideologies that form the bedrock of the American politics (17). Christina Lane has praised the show as it “makes efforts to revise traditional power relations and reorient its male characters toward a valuation of female resilience and community” (69). I will examine both narrative strategies such as these, and production practices, in the Mulvey tradition, to analyze women and politics in the series.

Chapter Five, titled “The Color of Politics in the Politics of Color,” is informed by Kellner’s categorical scheme and Fiske’s narrative codes accompanied by Stuart Hall’s theory of race. According to Hall, race is a “discursive construct” because its meaning is never fixed, which means race can be described as a “floating signifier.” In the history of the United States, much of the conflict surrounding the issues of nationalism has challenged assumptions that power was rightly held by white men. As Ian F. Haney Lopez explains, “The existence of Whites depends on the identification of cultures and societies, particular human traits, groups and individuals as non-White. Whites, thus, stand at the powerful vortex of race in the United States; whiteness is the source and maintaining
force of the systems of meaning that position some as superior and others as subordinate
(3). But, looking at race alone as a separate construct would be simplistic.

The history of U.S. nationalism cannot be separated from matters of race and
ethnicity and many significant concerns of the day might be better described as
transnational. As Anthony W. Marx says, “slavery, proscriptions against miscegenation,
colonialism, imperialism, manifest destiny, racially exclusive forms of citizenship or
nationalism, and exploitation were all justified by whites as preordained in nature.” (6)
This show appeared on the NBC schedule in 1999 at the same time when the major
broadcast networks were facing criticism for the predominantly white casting of their
programs. Instead of creating a role for a person of color among its senior staff, the show
diversified the cast by creating the character of Charlie Young, an early twenty something
African-American, who is the President’s personal assistant, kind of his “body man.”
Charlie is entrusted with the responsibility of keeping the President on schedule and
handling personal matters. Having an African-American serve a white President invoked
racial concerns, which the show eventually addressed. This show depicts the power
structure and racial ambivalence that permeates U.S. history and accentuates presidential
whiteness. The show features persons of color in powerful roles, but such performances,
especially those involving the military, reaffirm the hierarchy of a white male President
in command of black military leaders, ensuring the containment of black power and
advancement. As Parry Giles says, “The whiteness of the Presidency is juxtaposed
against portrayals of marginalized others who seem less fit to govern than their white
counterparts” (93). The episodes that form a part of my analysis will be “A Proportional
Response”, “Ways and means” and “What kind of Day has it been?” In writing about
portrayals of race on television, Gray writes, “Television was never just a neutral player, an invisible conduit, in these representations and constructions. Television itself also constituted a significant social site for shaping, defining, contesting, and representing claims about American society” (77). Although, as Hall notes, the fact that race is a floating signifier implies that these claims can never, truly, be fixed in meaning.

Chapter Six, titled “Sexual Politics and Hetronormativity,” will study the portrayal of sexuality in the series in terms of sexual orientation using Kellner’s category of sexuality and the narrative codes of Fiske. This analysis will also incorporate theories by Judith Butler and Michel Foucault to understand how The West Wing as a text and a part of the media culture creates representations that propagate conservative or liberal positions and advocate specific ideologies. Butler argues for “rupture and resignification as means of agency, while the critical genealogy of gender categories is an ongoing political project which, in its deconstruction of gender, sex and race functions as a means of social and ontological survival” (4). The episodes that form a part of the analysis is studying the portrayals of sexuality in the series are “The Midterms” and “The Portland Trip.” Butler stresses that normative heterosexuality is not the only thing that matters, and this analysis will look beyond hetronormativity to examine competing messages about gay rights.

In Chapter Seven, titled “Social Class Depoliticized,” I will use specific episodes to deal with the portrayal of social class in the series. It is interesting to study how the show features a category of cultural elites who articulate progressive discourse but don’t really come to the point of addressing social class in the show itself. Working with Kellner’s category of class and Fiske’s narrative codes, I will use Marx’s theory of the
relationship between classes and political forces under the sign of “representation” to study the portrayal of social class in the show. I will also be using Benjamin DeMott’s theory on the role of class in the American society where he demolishes the myth that America is a classless society and demonstrates “how much we lose politically, socially and morally, when we refuse to acknowledge and ameliorate the class differences that exist”(4). The profound irony of the series is that cultural elites articulate a progressive agenda, but the featured characters never seem to actually come in contact with other characters from lower classes. The series conveys stronger sentiments about social class through what is omitted, in some ways, than through what is included.

In Chapter Eight, titled “Conclusions: What’s In, What’s Out, and What it Means,” the analyses of specific elements of the series will be developed into overall conclusions about the overarching ideologies represented in the program. It is interesting to note how the texts of media culture appear to advance progressive discourse with respect to gender, race, sexual orientation and social class but end up presenting competing messages related to these categories. This affirms Kellner’s analysis of media culture, which he says is a contest of representations, leading to the reproduction of the social struggles and transcoding the political ideologies (56). While the series progressive overall, there are other perspectives represented and I will consider the implications these competing messages. Furthermore, my analysis of the series suggests that Kellner’s paradigm is inadequate as a means to address at least one issue central to constructing individual and collective identities and this limitation will be examined in my concluding chapter.
Chapter Four

The World of Politics and the Politics of Gender

Popular media culture clearly distinguishes between the streamlined forms of production characterized by capitalism and the creative meanings invested in all these products by the consumers. John Fiske has argued that, “popular culture is made by the people, not produced by the culture industry” (24). In reading a fashion magazine, listening to a music album, or watching a TV show, we--often unknowingly--are becoming part of the fast evolving media culture. This media culture is not only the most dominant and commercial form of culture today, but is also the most significant one as it presents ideology in the form of images and figures using the technical apparatus of film, television, and music. The previous chapters of this work have identified the narrative content of the television series The West Wing along with laying down the foundation for the theoretical and literary tools that I will be using henceforth for my analysis.

Exploring gender through the plot lines, content, narrative, production, and design elements of the show, this chapter will use different theoretical frameworks to understand how ideological and cultural discourses can provide material and resources for creating identities. Two episodes from the series titled “Women of Qumar” and “Manchester Part 1” will be used as examples of the ways gender is represented in the show, and I will also refer to specific instances from several other episodes to support my argument. The portrayals of gender in this series have made it important to explore how the different roles of women are portrayed through the popular culture lens of television and how the characters compare to real life counterparts.
NBC’s highly popular and much acclaimed show *The West Wing* has offered the viewers a sustained description of the internal workings of the White House, first in television broadcast and since then on DVD. Quick-witted and memorable female characters form a part of the Sorkin bandwagon all throughout the seven seasons of the show. They come across as equally competent as their male counterparts when caught in a debate about a political situation or anything else. Scratching beneath the surface of the show, however, brings out the narrow narrative frameworks and the stereotypes that categorize these beautiful and talented women. *The West Wing*, as Christina Lane points out, takes as its point of departure a progressive, multifaceted, highly politicized understanding of gender and racial relations (33). Press Secretary C.J. Cregg is the dominant female character on the series, more for the way the series features her so prominently as for the character’s assertiveness. Other significant, recurring characters are First Lady Dr. Abigail Bartlet, notable for her feminist views, and Donna Moss, who is an intuitive and confident secretary. In all of these characters, we see the independence, intelligence, the strength they share. We also see the oppression that almost all the female characters go through, but this shared circumstance is not so obvious. These characters are often sexually objectified and also silenced by the male characters, reinforcing the biases of our society.

Nationalism, gender, and sexuality are all socially and culturally constructed, and one such identity frequently plays an important role in constructing others. The empowerment of one gender, one nation, or one sexuality almost always occurs at the expense and disempowerment of another. Since people have multiple identities, however, the interplay among nation, gender, and sexuality often forces people to negotiate their
identities in complex ways. A nation is composed of sexed subjects whose “performativity” constructs not only their own gender identity but also the collective identity of the entire nation as well. The nation has largely been seen as a hetero-male project and is imagined as a brotherhood that springs from “masculinized memory, masculinized humiliation and masculinized hope” (Mayer, 6). Regardless of the location, nation has always been a male domain. But the important thing to note here is that since all men, and certainly not all people are created equal, this “horizontal comradeship” remains gender, sexuality, race, and class specific where internal hierarchies often occur along the lines of gender, race, class, and sexuality despite the national discourse of unity.

Most feminist theorists have argued that our societies are patriarchal in the sense that they revolve around male power and construct a masculine way of seeing the world. The phallicentric theory, as pointed out by Arthur Asa Berger, argues that “the institutions of societies, the cultures found in societies, the roles assigned to women in the elite arts, in the mass media, in every aspect of life, are shaped (to a certain degree unconsciously) by male power, male sexuality in general, and, in particular, by the male phallus” (31). One critical strand of the feminist theory relies heavily on Lacan’s structural-psychoanalytical approach where a woman is always marked as “other.” Her relation to the signifying chain is clearly problematic. She “lacks” the phallus and thus, must articulate her relation to the signification process in complex ways. This can be demonstrated very clearly in the terms of the show.

By virtue of her job as the Press Secretary of the White House, C.J. Cregg is always kept out of the information loop, and this position also entails that she does not make any political decisions, instead framing them for the press and the world and
functions as the “mouthpiece of the White House.” In an episode from the first season of the show titled “The Crackpots and These Women,” President Josh Bartlet and Leo McGarry are shown admiring the women in their offices, referring to C.J. as “a fifties movie star, so capable, so loving and energetic.” We can imagine that these comments are meant to laud and praise the women staffers for being confident and ambitious, but they actually are objectifying the women and positioning them as objects of desire within the male gaze. The character of C.J. in her role as the Press Secretary of the White House serves as an interesting site for the interplay of gender and politics. She is, without a doubt, an integral member of the President’s inner circle, and the fact that she commands authority is established the moment the show starts. In *The West Wing: The Official Companion*, Aaron Sorkin has admitted that the character of C.J. Cregg played by Allison Janney, “was the most underwritten role in the pilot” (2002, 101). It took several episodes of the first season to set the character of the only female member of the President’s senior staff rolling. Aaron Sorkin, in an interview said that “unlike a lot of young female characters in films and television today, C.J.’s life isn’t about ‘When is Mr. Right going to come along and save me from this?’ She is constructing her world for herself.” She is made a part of the political world but that comes at the cost of a nonexistent personal life, strengthening the stereotype that men can have a successful career as well as be settled in their personal lives while women need to choose between the two. She is politically astute, confident, and has a mind of her own but when it comes to managing her personal relationships, she is shown to be a failure.

Laura Mulvey’s gaze theory brings the cinematic apparatus of Hollywood cinema under question by arguing that the spectator is always positioned in a masculine position
with the figure of the woman on screen being depicted as the object of desire. Mulvey, in the essay titled “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” discusses the socially established interpretations of sexual difference that control the images and the erotic ways of looking by using psychoanalytical theory as political weapon and enumerating the ways in which the unconscious of the patriarchal society has structured the film form. A woman’s position in the patriarchal culture is only as a signifier for her male counterpart. It is the symbolic order that allows a man to live out his fantasies and obsessions by imposing a linguistic command on the silent image of a woman who, being rooted to her place, functions as the bearer and not the creator of meanings. Mulvey says that “in a world ordered by sexual imbalance, the pleasure in looking has been split between the active/male and the passive female” (47). For the traditional determinants of gaze, the male gaze has always projected its fantasy onto the female figure with women always being looked at and displayed with “their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness” (Mulvey 48).

In another episode titled “Bartlet’s Third State of the Union” from the second season of the series, C.J., and Ainsley Hayes are seen through an absolute male-centered gaze. C.J. appears on a show called Capital Beat that is covering the State of the Union address from the White House. She is introduced by the host as “the very lovely, the very talented, Claudia Jean Cregg.” During the commercial break, the host announces to everyone in the room that C.J. is not wearing any pants whatsoever. While C.J., is shown walking around in only a coat, Ainsley is also attired in a bathrobe, which is followed by Sam trying to set up a meeting between Ainsley and the President, asking the President to tell her that, “a lot of people assumed you were hired because you are a blond Republican
sex kitten. They were obviously wrong and keep up the good work.” These representations appear in stark contrast to ways in which men are presented but not in a way that invites critique of sexism males take for granted. Mulvey has argued that a woman is displayed as a sexual object by holding the look that signifies the male desire and that the presence of a woman is an indispensable element of the spectacle in the visual medium. In an episode from the second season episode titled “What Kind of Day has it Been,” the President is shown to be getting ready to address a group of students in Virginia. When discussing the content of the speech, both men and women of the White House share the screen when advising him on matters regarding the content of the speech. When the same discussion moves on to whether the President needs to remove his jacket in the middle of the address or keep it on, however, it’s only the female staff members who advise him on what looks good and what does not. This simply emphasizes the cosmetic part of the whole process of which the women are made an active part while the political matters are left to the discretion of the men, and the series does not question this, supposedly, natural order of things.

National and political narratives help construct the image of an ideal nation as this discourse serves the tastes of multiple audiences. In order to preserve its uniqueness and justify its existence, the nation is represented in a way that serves the aspirations of the elite. In almost all such narratives, the nation is feminized and characterized as in need of protection; women serve as the biological and cultural reproducers of the nation. They are portrayed as pure and modest, and it becomes the responsibility of the men to defend the national image and protect the virtue of the woman, wherein doing so they are actually defending the national image and protecting the national territory. In her essay “How to
Build a Man,” Ann Fausto Sterling has argued that “men are not born” but claims that masculinity is constructed through social discourse (Sterling, 1995:127). Most of the male behavior depends on the existing social relations and on the social code that predetermines these relations, and this suggests that the expression of masculinity will depend on the image that men have of themselves in terms of women, community, society, and the nation (Mayer, 14).

This idea is very clearly expressed in the episode titled “Women of Qumar,” which forms the core of this analysis. The episode deals with C.J. arguing with the rest of the cabinet and staff members on two issues, one of which she wins while she loses the other one. One of these concerns is an outbreak of the mad cow disease in Nebraska. No one will know the results of the test for seventy-two hours, and the argument is whether to make public the possibility of an outbreak of a mad cow disease. C.J. is also upset about arms sales to the Persian Gulf state of Qumar, known for its poor treatment of women. Staffers are stunned by C.J.’s emotional outburst concerning the administration’s renewal of its air base lease with Qumar. In this episode, C.J. personifies the overly emotional political woman, and the plot of the episode likewise reveals the ancillary role that women’s issues play in Presidential politics. “Listen,” C.J., tells Leo, “three weeks ago a woman in Qumar was executed for adultery. She didn't need a lawyer because there wasn't a trial. It was her husband’s word against hers. Later today I am going to announce that we are selling them tanks and guns?” Leo’s unconcerned positive response makes her walk away with a look of anger and determination, but this issue haunts her for the rest of the episode. At one point, she informs Josh, “In Qumar, when a woman gets raped, she’ll generally get beaten by her husband and sons as a punishment.
So at some point, we should talk about how to spend the $1.5 billion they are giving us.” C.J.’s concern about this issue reinforces the point that only women are concerned about women’s issues and suggests that violence against women is not a part of the “real-world” politics. Fran P. Hosken has suggested that violence against women is primarily carried out with an astonishing consensus among men in the world (Parry-Giles, 81). Throughout this episode, only C.J. seems to believe that it is wrong to negotiate an arms deal with a country that systematically oppresses women. Everyone else seems unaffected by her concern and, on the contrary, is surprised by C.J.’s “overreaction” on the issue. For most part, men and women are set up as adversaries in the series, and in this case, C.J.’s voice is not heard by the other male members of the house. Whether it's the issue of sexual trafficking or the oppression of women in Arab cultures, there is an urgency and forcefulness in the voices of the women that clearly reflects the fact that they must make an effort to be heard and noticed for something other than their appearance.

This episode also presents the interplay of another international and domestic woman’s issue when the First Lady, Abigail Bartlet asks Josh Lyman to meet with Amy Gardener of the Women’s Leadership Coalition to clarify problems with the word “forced” being used in a U.N treaty to modify the word “prostitution.” Josh says to Amy, “How am I not supposed to call you a hypocrite when you say that the government shouldn’t tell women what to do with their bodies?” Amy responds, “Prostitution is about the subjugation of women by men for profit.” Clearly, throughout this whole conversation she is the one who brings in the female perspective, but the reason why she has to fight to prove her point is because Josh is the boss. Amy offers a compelling argument regarding an issue that merits serious concern and attention, but this also gets
sidetracked by Josh’s inquiry into feeble attempts to make animal balloons for her nephews, which undermines the seriousness of the matter being discussed. The casual subordination of women is underscored throughout the series by the fact that Josh’s assistant, Donna, always follows her boss around even when she is trying to make him see reason. In this same episode, Donna takes Josh on and makes him see Amy’s point on the language on condoning prostitution, but the competing message presented in the staging of the scene is that she is his subordinate, which means that he calls the shots even when he is wrong on an issue.

The third season episode titled “Manchester Part 1” picks up where the second season ends with speculation about whether President Bartlet will seek a second Presidential term. The episode opens with the Press Secretary C.J., Cregg answering questions about whether or not the President run for a second term following the public disclosure of his Multiple Sclerosis (MS). Appearing flustered and distraught initially while explaining the process of subpoena that will follow because of the disclosure, President Bartlet finally makes his intentions clear about running for a second term saying, “And I am going to win.” Everyone knows that his predicament will make the re-election campaign very difficult. Furthermore, the First Lady is very unhappy with the President’s decision to run for a second term without having consulted her, and she tries her best to make him change his mind. All she wants is for her husband to understand that with the MS he should not be running for a second term because there are medical complications involved, but the President ignores her concerns and chooses to walk away. During this whole conversation, Abigail is seen sitting on a chair while the President is standing and commanding his presence in the room. Abigail’s response to his
announcement for running for a second term of the Presidency is not only of a personal but also a professional nature. The manner in which the President chooses to ignore her establishes his supreme authority, however. This is followed by a series of flashbacks, which reveal how the President will officially announce his plans to run for re-election, sending his staff into disarray as they work on his speech.

Throughout this whole episode, the focus of the storyline shifts completely to C.J., as she comes under intense scrutiny that makes Josh say, “They are making her the story.” When trying to answer questions about the public disclosure of the President’s disability, C.J., struggles to answer questions in the press room and makes the mistake of announcing that the “President’s relieved to be focusing on something that matters,” referring to the latest political crisis in Haiti. This is followed by Toby and Sam storming out of the press conference with Sam angrily questioning C.J., “He is relieved he might have to send troops into the battle…and kill Haitian civilians because it takes his mind off having lied to the electorate?” As she gets out of the pressroom, she walks past Toby and Sam and yells, “Just don’t say anything…damn it.” The high angle shots employed throughout this episode suggest C.J.’s incapability of deal with the crisis because placing the camera at a high angle and looking down on subjects suggests their vulnerability and weakness. She is put in the spotlight with all the press members staring at her, and the camera cuts from C.J., to the press members emphasizing the mistake she has committed. She is confused, distraught, and constantly trying to avoid the eyes of the members of the press corps. While addressing the briefing, she is being watched upon and observed by Leo and Toby, which brings returns us to Laura Mulvey’s gaze theory and the presence of a male gaze in terms of the audience and her co-stars as well as the camera. Finally,
since she has no response to most of the questions, C.J. walks out of the briefing leaving many questions unanswered, which confirms her powerlessness in the situation.

C.J. goes through two on-again and off-again relationships during the course of the show before she is promoted to the position of the Deputy Chief of Staff after Leo McGarry passes away. Danny Concannon, the White House correspondent for the Washington Post played by Timothy Busfield, is portrayed as an occasional love interest for C.J. throughout the first two seasons of the show. Danny’s character disappears from the show without any explanation and returns in the fourth season of the show suggesting the possibility of renewing the relationship. During the third season of the series, C.J. becomes romantically attracted to her bodyguard, Simon Donovan played by Mark Harmon, who has been appointed to protect her after she has an email stalker threatening because of her criticism of Saudi Arabia’s treatment of women. An episode from the third season of the show titled “Enemies Foreign and Domestic” shows her as not very happy with the arrangement of a bodyguard because of which she becomes rebellious, refusing protection, and engages in acts of resistance. The course of the next two or three episodes show her falling in love with Simon, who refuses her advances until his duty to his nation is fulfilled. The third season finale episode titled “Posse Comitatus” ends with Simon dying just a few hours before he and C.J. are free to pursue their relationship. The series of events left me thinking as to what could be the reason behind the gender bias when it comes to the power relationships in the show. Throughout the course of the show, most of the female characters are shown to be single: C.J., Donna, Ainsley, Amy, and Joey. The only female character with a successful personal relationship is the First Lady Abigail Bartlet, who has given up her professional responsibilities in the world of
medicine to accommodate the President’s lifestyle. The idea that the show propagates is that when women choose to have professional lives, their personal lives need to be sacrificed or put on hold. This implies that our abilities and strengths are being doubted, suggesting that the female sex cannot think outside “the box” or deal with a stressful situation with letting their emotional minds take over.

The major action in most of the television programs, be it comedies or dramas, consists of conversations focusing on romance, familial and other interpersonal relationships, reflecting the traditional female stereotype (Katzman, 1972). One of the prominent stereotypes for women across cultures all over the world is that the female sex is more emotional than the male sex. This stereotype is built up very strongly with respect to the character of C.J., who is shown as being highly emotional, especially on issues pertaining to violence against women. Being the public face of the Bartlet administration, she is portrayed as being independent, assertive, and a strong member of the Bartlet family. This character also serves as a clear example of the link between the personal and political as the character’s feelings consistently inform her work. Although she serves the cause of female empowerment in the show, she is shown as being emotional, and questions about her abilities arise regularly. In most of the first season episodes, this comes across as the major part of the storyline as C.J. goes from one episode to another with her political credibility being challenged. In the episode titled “Mandatory Minimums” from season one, she makes an inaccurate public statement describing how the President is required to nominate a Democrat and a Republican to the Federal Election Commission, which is termed as a “dumb mistake” by Leo McGarry. Another episode from the same season titled “Mr. Willis of Ohio” shows C.J., taking lessons from
Sam about census sampling. What establishes the stereotype about C.J.’s political incapability is an incident from another first-season episode titled “The White House Pro-Ann” when she simply proclaims, “I don't really understand anything.” This is in stark contrast to how the male characters are sketched out and portrayed in the same show. Cruising through different plots in the narrative, Sorkin informs the audience that the Chief of Staff Leo McGarry, having had an opportunity to successfully serve in various political appointments, is referred to as “a world class political operative” by the Vice President in the episode “Post Hoc Ergo Propter Hoc.” Deputy Chief of Staff Josh Lyman and Chief Communications Director Toby Ziegler are also portrayed as experienced political players on the show. On the other hand, C.J. and Deputy Communications Director Sam Seaborne are the only two members of the senior staff who are recruited from a non-political background. Sam’s background as a political lawyer never causes him anxiety with regard to working on the campaign and he also never questions his authority on political matters, while C.J. is always shown displaying anxiety over her abilities to work for the President.

In terms of cultural constructions, the historical trajectories of race, gender and sexuality are embedded with the ideological and power relations. In the seven-season run, *The West Wing*, was able to provide provocative political dialogue and also gain overwhelming critical acclaim. One of the very interesting aspects of the show is the various methods employed for representations of gender through the multitude of female characters. The beginning of the series was marked by the presence of only a handful of female characters following stereotypical representations. As Parry Giles writes, “the women from members of feminist organizations arriving at the White House to celebrate
the President’s victory in sexy evening attire cements their status as sexual objects of the successful male political actors who run to the door to greet them” (86). For most part of the show the male characters like Josh, Toby, Sam and most often the President himself are shown to be more politically savvy than the female characters like C.J., Amy, Donna or the First Lady Abigail Bartlet who are in equally important positions in the White House. The margins of political sphere, in this show are marked by the needs and thoughts of the male members as the construction of women’s issues is looked upon as disrupting the real world of politics. Bruno Gianelli, the President’s campaign manager in the episode “Twenty Hours in America” declares that the ‘biggest nonsense issue in the Presidentail campaign will belong to the women’ emphasizing the fact that women’s issues don’t really matter in the world pf politics. The female characters in the show are plenty, but they are not offered much to do, except for asking questions, taking notes, following instructions and looking beautiful. In this chapter, I was able to go through and discuss the numerous ways in which gender portrayals are represented in the show and following Kellner’s theory of multiculturalism which encompasses race, gender, sexuality and social class as being essential constituents of the media culture, the next chapter takes up the discussion of race as seen on the show, which – like gender – is less progressive in its presentation on the show than one would expect.
Chapter Five

The Color of Politics in the Politics of Color

It is important to understand the products of media culture because the constituents of media culture help us create identities and our sense of selfhood. Artifacts of mass media help us construct our sense of class, ethnicity, and race, and the media stories provide the symbols, myths, and the resources that help us constitute a common culture. Media images help shape our view of the world and lead to the formation of our deepest values. As Gail Dines and Jean Humez point out, cultural studies shows how media culture articulates the dominant values, political ideologies, social developments and novelties of the era (56). Popular forms of media culture, such as television, film, and music, are often broadly moderate to try to appeal to the widest possible audience. Occasionally, mainstream media texts lend themselves to more radical or oppositional readings, but most often the narratives are ideologically ambiguous, combining various political positions.

The long-standing history of America’s immigration restrictions has created a culture where non-whites are seen as perpetual outsiders, and whiteness is considered the normative standard of identity (Parry-Giles, 105). As John Downing and Charles Husband point out, race “as a constructed social category has been able to derive its power partially from the psychological dynamics of social categorization and partially from the powerful taken-for-granted legitimacy that race categories have acquired in their historical formulation” (2). Race is also defined as a theoretical construct that is supposed to be a product of the realm of ideas, thought, reflection, and perhaps even imagination (Gandy, 35). Racial projects are both discursive and symbolic in the sense that they are
oriented towards the creation of meaning, and they also influence the allocation of economic and political resources.

In the face of modern political cynicism, *The West Wing*, a one-hour television drama about the fictional Presidency of Democrat leader Josiah Bartlet, gathered strong ratings and public appeal. Nominated for four consecutive Emmy Awards for Best Television Drama, the show was able to provide a unique look into the inner corridors of the West Wing. When *The West Wing* was on air, Americans were living in times of unprecedented economic prosperity. There was, however, a general uneasiness about the quality of their leaders, the competence of their institutions, and the larger meaning of their lives. This insecurity coincided with the fact that television representations of issues related to race became intertwined with the issues of the individual, group, national, and ethnic identity. Stuart Hall, in summarizing the key debates on the issue of identity, has said that identity can never be thought of as an already accomplished fact and should be seen more as a cultural practice that is always in process and is constituted within and not outside ‘representation.’ Hall, in his essay “Cultural Identity and Diaspora,” has described two different ways of thinking about cultural identity. The first position defines cultural identity in terms of one shared culture, a sort of collective wherein our cultural identities reflect the common historical experiences and shared cultural codes that provide us, as one people, with stable, unchanging, and continuous frames of meaning (223). The second position recognizes that even with the points of similarity, there are also critical and significant points of difference that constitute “what we really are.”

It’s very easy to trace the network of relationships that brought the staff of *The West Wing* together: networking based on family and social connections. Leo McGarry is
the nexus of the whole group, and he has a history with each of the staffers who come on board for the “Bartlet for America” Campaign. He knows Josh Lyman through Josh’s father. He has also worked with Josh’s friend Sam Seaborn on the Whitaker campaign. The career campaigner Toby Ziegler knows Leo from around Washington, and Toby brings C.J. onto the team. The maverick Donna Moss finds her way into the team without a personal connection, but the most intriguing of all of these is the entry of Charlie Hill, who emerges as the personal aide for the President Bartlet after the election. He comes in to be interviewed for the messenger’s job in the White House and gets picked up by Josh for the position of the President’s personal assistant, a job that requires him to wait on the President at all times. While the episode from the second season titled “A Proportional Response” primarily concerns the President’s quandary over how to retaliate against the Syrians, it is also the episode in which Charlie Young gets hired, marking the entry of a person of color in a major role into the show. By including the young actor Dule Hill as the President’s personal aide, Charlie Young, Sorkin was able to add an African-American presence to the show’s core cast, putting an end to the criticism that the show was facing in terms of not having a person of color included in the main cast but inviting criticism that the first major black character on the series is cast in the role of “servant” to the president.

Throughout most of the first season episode “A Proportional Response,” female and black characters are seen mostly towards the background of the different shots and are often photographed slightly out of focus. This implies that their presence is required to serve the purpose of just supporting the main characters, and they do not have a firm identity of their own. When Charlie Young is interviewed for the messenger’s job then
selected by Josh as the President’s personal aide, it is never clearly explained why Josh is so insistent in hiring him. Because there was criticism that the show didn’t have a person of color when it began, it is impossible to tell if Josh is motivated to hire Charlie because he is impressed with Charlie’s credentials, feels sorry for the young man because his mother was a police officer killed in the line of duty, or if the creative team simply wanted to add an African American character as quickly as possible. Certainly, nowhere during the interview between Josh and Charlie is it clear what has impressed Josh so much about the young man. Thinking he is being interviewed for a messenger’s job, Charlie still can’t quite believe that he is actually in the White House. When it finally dawns on him that he is being hired for the position of the personal aide to the President, he is stunned. The stereotyping of people of color is very explicitly portrayed in the show, particularly in the way these characters are associated with violence. Charlie’s mother died from cop-killer bullets in the line of duty as a Washington, D.C., police officer. Also, in an episode from the second season titled “The Midterms,” Charlie’s relationship with the “first daughter” Zoey Bartlet is repeatedly brought up in relation to the violent white supremacists who threaten them, motivating a Secret Service investigation.

A recurring theme of the show—that most characters do their jobs with equal parts patriotism and awe presidency—comes through strongly when Josh Lyman is interviewing Charlie. What follows is a sense of skepticism amongst the other members of the White House about the racial implications of hiring a person of color for the position of the President’s personal aide. Josh speaks to Leo, and Leo consults the chair of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral Percy “Fitz” Fitzwallace (played by John Amos,
best known as the father on the Norman Lear sitcom *Good Times*) about whether this hiring decision will have racial implications. Fitzwallace is African-American, so asking him about the matter highlights the “otherness” of Africans Americans in the show by demonstrating how little understanding white officials have about perceptions of blacks about these matters. What Fitzwallace has to say also reveals an ideological orientation towards racial matters in the show. When Leo says, “The president’s personal aide, they’re looking at a kid. Do you have any problem with a young black man waiting on the President?” Fitzwallace only has this to say, “I’m an old man and I wait on the President. You gonna pay him a decent wage? You gonna treat him with respect in the workplace? Then why the hell should I care. I’ve got some real honest to God battles to fight Leo. I don’t have time for the cosmetic ones.” This comment accomplishes the ideological dismissal of racial questions and concerns in the White House hiring practice. After all, the two men having the conversation are highly placed government officials, and on another level, they are actors reading lines written by Sorkin and his staff. It is less clear how “real people” and social activists would feel about the hire. This conversation also presents the idea that the White House staff is making too big a deal out of nothing, which has the effect of diminishing the importance of race by saying it is not an issue. Another important factor is the unwillingness that Charlie has for the job of the President’s personal assistant, which contrasts with the eagerness with which Josh pushes him to take the job. Again, it is never clearly outlined why Josh is so enamored with Charlie and why he wants him hired. What this makes me think is that there must have been considerable concern in Sorkin’s mind that he was creating the role of a young black man who is essentially a modern-day manservant to a powerful
white male, but that he did feel the need to write into the script that race was not an issue because, at least on some level, it is. The network casting personnel, it seems, were more concerned about how well such a move would go with the larger audience than what the character was bringing to the show, and those doubts are reflected in the characters that we see on the small screen. Fitzwallace, although not mentioned in the credits, continues in seasons two, three, and four to play a more significant role in the show as the chair of Joint Chiefs of Staff. In the second season, the producers bring in Dr. Nancy McNally (Anna Deavere Smith) as the National Security Advisor, replacing one person of color with another in a recurring role.

Stuart Hall, a key figure in the international diffusion and subsequent intellectual development, discusses representation as being one of the central practices that produce culture and describes this as a key moment in what has been called the circuit of culture (Hall, 1997). Hall has also emphasized that language is the system of representation where its symbolic practice gives meaning or expression to the idea of belonging to a national culture and creates the discourse of national belongingness. The discussions about race, according to Hall, follow the theme of representing difference, which follows the poetics and politics of exhibiting. This takes meaning in both how other cultures are made to signify through the discourses of exhibition (poetics) and how these practices are inscribed by relations of power (politics). The writings of W.E.B.Du Bois were concerned with the representations of race and he said, “The whites obviously seldom picture brown and yellow folk, but for five hundred centuries they have exhausted every ingenuity of trick, of ridicule and caricature on black folk” (60).
In images that are presented through the visual medium, there can never be one true meaning. Meaning, according to Hall, “always floats and cannot be truly fixed. However, attempting to fix it is the work of a representational practice, which intervenes in the many potential meanings of an image in an attempt to privilege one” (228). What works in the case of such images is the theory of binary opposition where people who are in any way significantly different from the majority are represented through sharply opposed polarized and binary extremes. It is essential to understand the representational practices, such as casting people of color in subordinate roles or as extras to fill the background spaces of the White House, that reinforce racial and ethnic differences in a way that marginalize people of color.

Saussure has talked about the use of language as a model of how culture works and has argued that difference matters because it is essential to meaning: without the difference, meaning could not exist. The reason we can understand what black means, Saussure argued, is not because there is some essence of “blackness” but because meaning can be constructed by contrasting it with its opposite, white. According to Saussure, meaning is relational, and it is the difference between the white and black that signifies and carries meaning. Meaning depends on the difference between perceived opposites, and it is the binary extremes that divide the world into the rigid two-part structure, which is very common to cultural myth and popular narratives. Philosopher Jacques Derrida has argued that there is very little neutral binary opposition because one pole of the binary is usually the dominant one. Fiske has observed that whiteness has been able to survive “only because of its ability to define, monitor and police the boundary between itself and its others and to control any movement across it” (48).
the first season of the show, Josh and Leo are seen having an exchange about the racial implications of hiring Charlie Young, a black man for the position of the President’s assistant. They also consult the Joint Chief of Staff, Fitzwallace, who is also an African American, which highlights the otherness of African Americans in the show. This discussion brings reinforces the ideological dismissal of racial questions and concerns in the White House hiring practices. This exchange successfully establishes the hierarchy of Jed Bartlet’s administration and the introduction of Nancy McNally, who serves as the National Security Advisor, makes space for another person of color in the show.

The episode titled “Midterms” opens with Josh recuperating from his surgery while business is going on at the White House as usual. The staff is meeting at White House to push for the Midterm congressional elections which are due in twelve weeks. Sam informs everyone that the administration is polling at eighty-one percent, but those numbers are soft. The numbers look good, but they are not good enough to hold up till the election, but, still, Toby wants to use this honeymoon period as leverage for domestic terrorism initiative. Toby is of the opinion that this newfound popularity of the President can help the administration turn up the heat on the extremist groups. As C.J. deflects press requests on how the assassination attempt has affected the mood of the White House, she is well aware of the fact that everyone is carrying psychological scars of the incident. Charlie seems the most affected by the incident, especially after having learned that the incident was an attempt to kill him (rather than the president) by the all white West Virginia Group because he is a black guy dating the white President’s daughter. He is so affected by the incident that he refuses to answer calls from his girlfriend Zoey and also reacts very coldly to the President.
Another interesting example that I point to now in this same episode demonstrates how the show is giving out competing messages even for the category of race. Sam, in the later part of the episode meets up with an old friend named Tom Jordan from Duke Law School and convinces him to run for Congress after the death of Grant Samuels, the current Congressman. As soon as Tom walks out of the White House accompanied with his wife, C.J. tells Sam that there is a problem with Tom being offered the candidacy of the Democratic Congress because there are reports that “Jordan likes white juries for black defendants.” This fact is also pointed out by Leo who tells Sam that Tom Jordan belonged to an all-white fraternity, which is rejected by Sam who says that the all-white fraternity Tom belonged was not an exclusively white fraternity; it just didn’t have any “black pledges.” Leo wants Sam to tell Tom that he can’t be considered for the candidacy because the President won’t support him, which prompts Sam to say “I told him we would stand behind him. I told him he would have our full support…I was asked to ask him. We walk away now, that’s it. He’s a racist. The White House just said so.” All Leo says to this is, “We can’t afford all the things we want Sam. It’s over.” This gives out a very competing message to the audience because no one in the White House seems to notice the fact that there are hardly any people of color amongst an all-white staff, but Sam gets offended the moment one of his white friends is called racist.

Charlie runs into a little black kid named Jeffery Macintosh whose father, Andrew Macintosh, is there to provide some technical support for the White House. When Charlie introduces himself to Andrew, he tells him that it would be a surprise if someone didn’t know Charlie because he is the person who almost got the President killed. Charlie tells Andrew the story of how his mother got shot at while she was on duty one
night. Andrew then tells Charlie something that his father used to tell him: “If they are shooting at you, you must be doing something right.” This makes Charlie rethink about his decision to avoid the President and Zoey because of his guilt over the incident and his desire to keep them away from any possible danger. What is very interesting is that toward the end of the show, we see Josh, Donna, C.J. and Toby sitting outside Josh’s apartment enjoying the night when they are joined by Sam, who brings them some election news. It is very interesting to observe here that the aftermath of this assassination attempt, which was directed towards Charlie, has been the most difficult for him to handle. A black guy has been attacked by a group of white racists for the simple reason that he was dating the white President’s daughter. Yet in times like these when all of the staff members are trying to help each other get over their psychological wounds, Charlie is nowhere to be seen.

bell hooks has said that “One of the tragic ironies of contemporary black life is that individuals succeed in acquiring material privilege often by sacrificing their positive connection to black culture and black experience” (23). The reinforcement of the Presidential power reaches its peak in the episode titled “Celestial Navigation” from the first season of the show when Leo McGarry and Deborah O’Leary, the African American Secretary of Housing and Urban development discuss her testimony on Capitol Hill. The reason for conflict arises when she suggests that her congressional inquisitors, and all Republicans by extension, are racists. Instead of supporting his appointee O’Leary, who is of the opinion that the President is using his government authority to spit at poor people and minorities, all Leo says is, “we need their votes on any number of issues, including by the way, the budget for the Department of Housing and Urban
Development. I think, Debbie your role first and foremost is to serve the President- a task today at which you spectacularly failed and you are going to apologize.” This whole discussion brings to light the fact the supremacy that the Presidential politics has over everything else. This scene not only reinforces the racial supremacy of the whiteness but also makes an African American woman apologize for no real fault of hers.

Since “race” is a concept that is capable of multiple significations, race matters not only because “it” functions as a category in whose name hierarchies are produced and maintained. What this gives rise to is the practice of racism which is an exclusionary and marginalizing practice that quite often works through the construction of binary oppositions such as us/them, self/other, and white/black (or white/other). These binary constructions are hardly ever neutral, and there is always a dimension of power between the end points of such oppositions. In talking about such binaries, what we are really getting at is how the first term subordinates the other. As Jacques Derrida has emphasized, “we are not dealing with peaceful coexistence, but rather a violent hierarchy. One of the two terms govern the other, or has the upper hand” (1981, 41). Such binary constructions set up symbolic boundaries between the acceptable and the unacceptable, and the normal and the deviant. In such cases, the opposition is constructed in such a way that physical features, namely skin color, are linked to attributes of intellect and behavior, establishing a hierarchy of quality between white and black. The concept of racism refers to an ideology and practices of which “black” people are the exclusive victims; racism refers to what “white” people think about and do to “black” people. The centrality of the “white/black” dichotomy denies the possibility, by definition that any group other than “white” people can articulate practice or benefit from racism and suggests that only
“black people” can be the object or victim of racism (Guillaumin, 44). This is demonstrated very clearly in the series, as the main characters in the show are all white men.

For a show of such a stature that ran for seven seasons and enjoyed immense popularity, analyzing the category of race seems a daunting task at times. The first season of the show includes only a handful characters of color and demonstrates how the show very convincingly went through all the seasons and wrapped up after showing only white male men occupying important positions in the administration. The idea that the show builds up in the mind of a viewer is that the white male presidency and a support staff of primarily white male men subordinates the power of persons of color. During the time that the show was on air, the television industry was facing severe criticism for its failure to depict positive characters of color. Reaction to that criticism saw the president appointing a Latino to the Supreme Court, an African American woman serving as the national security adviser, a person of color serving the President, and some other background characters thrown in for good measure. Using Kellner’s theory of multiculturalism and multiperspectivalism, I was able to look at race as one of the identities informing a larger cultural map. As I move on to the next category comprising his paradigm in the following chapter, sexuality, I will draw on what I have learned so far about competing messages in the text as well as useful theories and specific examples from the show.
Chapter Six

Sexual Politics and Heteronormativity

Michel Foucault has discussed how sexuality has come to be seen as a fixed aspect of our identity—something that describes the truth about who we are. Human sexuality, Foucault argues, is not producing knowledge or truth; knowledge (the idea that we need to get to the truth) is producing sexuality. Disciplines and institutions that investigate sex, even the most scientific of inquiries, are also a means of obtaining sexual pleasure, just as pleasure in sex is tied to trying to unravel its mystery (Foucault, 1979, 19). Scholars have argued that homosexuals are under-represented in mainstream media (Brookey, 1991; Gross, 1991, Kielwasser & Wolf, 1992), which indicates few available role models in mass media for positive adjustment and self-acceptance. This chapter explores the ways in which The West Wing propagates the idea of heteronormative sexuality, which as described by Denis Provencher in the article, “Sealed With a Kiss: Heteronormative Narrative Strategies in NBC’s Will & Grace” as an idea where the “codependent relationship between a man and woman who can do everything but sleep with each other” (Holleran, 65). This simply implies that the narrative structures of shows propagate the idea that heterosexual relations are the only normative standards of society with homosexuality being a deviant behavior that will not be well received by the audience. In addition to creating a scenario in which heterosexuality is established as “normal,” the absence of homosexual characters on television may also contribute to the idea that gay men, lesbians, and transgendered people are marginalized or ignored by the dominant society as represented on television, a medium largely controlled by middle-aged male and upper-middle class heterosexuals (Gerbener & Gross, 1976; Seger, 1996
and Steenland, 1990). The absence of homosexual characters may also serve as a metaphorical model for hiding one’s sexual orientation, the message being that if such characters exist then they should remain (safely) in the closet where others cannot see them.

The episode “The Portland Trip” begins with the President flying overnight to Portland, Oregon. C.J., on board against her wishes because she made the mistake of making fun of Notre Dame (which is the President’s alma mater), and President Bartlet is forcing her to wear a Notre Dame cap and attend a football game with him on the return trip. Aboard Air Force One, Toby and Sam are grappling with a speech about education, but Sam is of the opinion that a speech about education should talk about permanent revolution while Toby differs with him about the wisdom of quoting Mao Tse-tung in a speech about education in a democratic nation. Meanwhile, back at the White House, Donna is preparing to go out on a date for dinner while Josh plans to wait in his office for Congressman Matt Skinner, a Republican with whom Josh plans to discuss the Marriage Recognition Act over a few beers. This is the only episode in the seven years of the series to deal directly with gay rights, which would be surprising (especially since the creator of the show, Aaron Sorkin, is gay) except that the show generally takes an implicit rather than explicit view on a number of issues including gender and race, as already discussed, and social class, which will be discussed in the next chapter.

For most of the episode related to this particular storyline, we see Josh and Matt discuss the Marriage Recognition Act with Josh taking the position that the Act should not be passed. Matt tells Josh that the bill was passed by the Senate with eighty-five votes and passed by the House with 342 votes. He notes that 60 percent of the American
people oppose legally sanctioned gay marriage, and the President has to sign the bill because the minority cannot impose its will or morals on the majority. Josh is of the opinion that the Marriage Recognition Act would give the government access into people’s bedrooms (private lives), which he sees as absolutely inappropriate, and Josh is unable to understand why Matt has no problem with the content and tone of the debate over the bill. Looking Matt in the eye, Josh tells him, “There were some very ugly things said about homosexuals by the members of your own party. In fact, they were said by the same person who escorted you and now is sitting out in the lobby and still you support this bill.” When Matt replies in affirmative to all of these questions, Josh asks him, “Congressman you are gay?” and Matt says, “Yes I am.” Matt wants the President to go along with public opinion and sign the bill just as he is going along with his colleagues in the Republican Party. This can be read as an example of heteronormativity mentioned earlier because the Senator takes a stance that upholds the status quo rather than trying to extend civil rights for gay men and lesbians. The Senator is gay himself, but he wants the bill to be passed either because he does not want his personal sexual preferences interfering with matters of the State or because he does not want to call attention to himself and risk losing his position because of his sexuality. With beer bottles piling up on the table, Matt tells Josh that any veto to the act will be overridden anyway. Josh brings up the logistics when he reminds the Senator that since the Senate is not in the session, the President is free to stick the bill in his pocket, and it can be very easily vetoed. Josh points out that the majority leader of Matt’s party compared homosexuality to kleptomania and sex addiction. Matt simply says that he has told their leader that he was wrong. Josh is about to burst and finally he asks how the Senator can be a member of
a party that condemns gays. Matt takes the question seriously, explaining that he believes in 95 percent of what the Republicans stand for and that his whole life is not about being gay. As Matt leaves, Josh tells the Senator that the President will sign the bill. The Congressman who escorted him to the meeting congratulates Matt and puts his arm around him to which Matt responds, “Get your hand off my shoulder, Congressman.”

Later on, the President also does not want to put his name on the bill and terms the legislation “gay bashing.” Josh agrees with this assessment. Two significant points arise here: this is the only episode in the whole series dealing with homosexuality in any form, and the episode leaves viewers to contend with competing messages. It seems very strange how this is the only episode to deal overtly with sexual orientation in a series that was critically acclaimed for seven years as a program that, ostensibly, championed progressive causes. Even though homosexuality is a widely accepted behavior in Western society today, studying the representation of homosexuals in mass media is still equivalent to studying minorities. This holds very true with respect to the show where only one episode is dedicated to dealing with this subject and even that one episode ends up without a direct challenge to homophobia by having leaders accept the status quo. Beginning in the late 1970s, gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender issues have been increasingly addressed by different academic disciplines (Gross, 2005). The emergence of queer theory in the 1990s led to gender being described as not only a determined category but as “multiple, contradictory, fragmented, incoherent, disciplinary, disunified, unstable and fluid” category (Gamson, 2003). In terms of the show, it is also very interesting how the only homosexual character we see on the screen is Matt, which can in some ways be seen as a reflection of Aaaron Sorkin’s own sexuality. This character is
present in the show only for one episode and does not make any more appearances, so the show ends its stint with homosexuality in a very brief manner. It feels as though the creator of the show wanted the audience to get a brief idea about his personality through this one particular episode.

The word ‘sex’ has different meanings, which, in a very general sense, applies to the categories of male and female. In the recent times, however, a distinction between sex in the physiological sense and gender, which is a cultural construct evolving from learned behavior patterns, has been proposed and is now widely accepted. The different meanings associated with the terms “sex” and “gender” tend to coalesce in people’s minds with the implication that gender is expressed through sexuality. People are encouraged to identify themselves in terms of their sexuality, which is interpreted as the core of one’s self. This is very clearly evident in the show when Josh asks Senator Matt as to why being a homosexual he supports a party that compares homosexuality to kleptomania and condemns gays. All Matt says is, “All my life is not about being gay.” Certainly, that is true, but it is still hard to see how he can go along with policies that marginalize him as a gay man by denying his equality. In our society, heterosexual relations are seen as the norm, and homosexual relations are stigmatized as nonconformity to the norms of heterosexuality, which threatens the dominant ideology’s view of sex being “innate” and “natural” (Caplan, 56). This is also very clearly linked to the idea of heteronormativity as discussed in the earlier part of the chapter where heterosexuality is the only accepted standard in our society as a way of establishing expectations and enforcing accepted sexual behavior.
Of all the variations of sexual behavior, homosexuality has had the most vivid social pressure and has evoked the most lively (if usually grossly misleading) historical accounts. The politics of sex has made it almost impossible not to connect the concepts of sexuality with the ideologies of class struggle. A study of homosexuality is essential because of its own intrinsic interest and because of the light it throws on the wider regulation of sexuality, the development of sexual categorization, and the range of possible sexual identities. Homosexual behavior has existed in a variety of different cultures, and that it is an ineradicable part of human sexual possibilities. Attitudes towards homosexuality are culturally specific and have varied enormously across different cultures and through various historical periods. Sexuality, like gender is socially constructed, and, as Kellner has pointed out, the social constitutions of gender, race, sexuality and social class help produce identities in contemporary societies. The two categories of sexuality and social class that are critical constituents of cultural texts are blatantly ignored in The West Wing. In order to examine the various forms of domination and oppression that individuals and certain groups of people experience, it becomes essential to study that which is left out. As Kellner has said, media artifacts need to be interrogated from a multiperspectival approach so that we can avoid one-sidedness and partial vision that keeps us from seeing what is really going on in a media text and how it links to the larger culture. In terms of The West Wing, one of the most ignored categories in the series is social class, and that is what I will be discussing in the next chapter.
Chapter Seven

Social Class Depoliticized

Television, without a doubt, is a medium that by definition expresses the dominant cultural perspectives because it must attract a large audience to be successful commercially. Horace Newcomb and Paul Hirsch concluded that “the focus of television criticism might profitably be the cultural role of entertainment that works parallel with a close analysis of television program content in all its various textual levels and forms” (Parry-Giles & Parry-Giles, 5). The television show The West Wing is comprised of elaborate set design, likeable characters, and the presentation of actual political issues framed by fictional narratives. In today’s times when we have been witnessing a non-stop interaction between the media and the consumer, it has become essential to understand that media as a source of cultural pedagogy because it is teaching us how to react to different social groups as well as how to conform to the dominant system of norms, values, and practices. The previous chapters of this study have gone through the categories of gender, race, and sexuality as proposed by Douglas Kellner in his multicultural and multiperspectival cultural studies theory. This chapter takes a close look at the fourth category that he has talked about, social class. My earlier chapters have taken up different episodes from the show as examples to support the arguments I make, but here I am proposing that the lack of any episode for me to use as an example in itself conveys a lot.

In a very simple sense, social class refers to the hierarchical distinctions between individuals or groups in societies or cultures, and Marx has defined class in terms of the extent to which an individual or social group has control over the means of production.
Vladimir Lenin has defined classes as “large groups of people differing from each other by the place they occupy in a historically determined system of social production, by their relation to the means of production, by their role in social organization of labor, and by the dimensions of the share of social wealth of which they dispose and the mode of acquiring it.” Wolfe has defined the “middle class” as “a cluster of attitudes, beliefs, practices and lifestyles that defines what it means to live in a way not too poor to be considered dependent on others and not too rich to be so luxuriously ostentatious that one loses touch with common sense” (Wolfe, 1998). This implies that people’s class identities, one identifying as a member of the middle class for example, comes not only from the economic definitions of middle class status but also from the moral and cultural meanings of middle class life, as well. Television is considered a cultural product that reflects people’s lives and vice versa and is, thus, considered a powerful apparatus that can create and perpetuate the image of class status, stereotype people’s perceptions and beliefs of classes, and reinforce the stereotypes of classes formed by the media.

Many social thinkers have talked about the issue of class and discussed the influence of such issues in social relations. Many theories can be attributed to Karl Marx and Max Weber. According to Marx, classes are defined as a social relationship rather than a position or rank in the society and the system of stratification is based on people’s relationship to the economic process (Leeder, 1996). The relationship between classes is a contradictory or antagonistic relationship and materialistic determinism is based on the relationship to the means of production. Marx believed that because the fundamental interests of the two classes—the owners and the workers—are inherently incompatible and because the owners possess great social, political and economic power, eventually the
workers conditions would deteriorate to bring about collective, conscious and revolutionary action that would end exploitation. Arguing the social stratification is based on more factors than economics, however, Marx Weber criticized Marx’s theory of class conflict. He argued that it was not ownership of private property but access to basic opportunities and resources in the marketplace that define one’s class position in the society. While Weber focused on how classes are determined within highly rationalized forms of economic interactions and markets and the life chances of people, Marx was interested in how class determines both life chances and exploitation (Wright, 2002). Based on social anthropology, William Lloyd Warner divided Americans into three classes in his book *Social Class in America* in 1949. Each of the three classes and be subdivided into upper and lower groupings as well.

Following the definition of social class provided above, the first thing that struck me when I began to study the category of social class in *The West Wing* was that I didn’t have an episode to pick from the entire seven seasons of the show to use an example for my analysis. For all of the other categories that Kellner has talked about, I have been able to pick an episode to demonstrate what’s present and also to specifically point out what’s lacking. For this category, the show is focused singularly on upper middle class cultural elites who go through the series without even observing the fact that that their collective experience is not a composite of our society. A handful of characters belonging to the lower middle class are represented in peripheral roles. These are what I would term the “lower-paid white collar workers” who represent the working class, the secretaries and the assistants whom we see on the show. In previous chapters, I have talked about how the show is full of white males who would like to call themselves progressive, but by the
time I came to this category, I am seriously questioning how progressive the creative
perspective of the series really is because the intentional (or not-so-intentional) thought
process that has gone into creating the show seems to be unconcerned in deeper levels
about key issues and representations of gender, race, sexual orientation, and social class.
There is a huge contradiction in the text that this progressive government is populated
with a president and staffers who are so blind to the disconnect between what they say
they stand for and how they act in episodes that are meant to reflect daily life at the White
House.

Kellner is of the opinion that cultural studies lets us examine and critically
scrutinize culture without any prejudices towards a cultural text, institution, or practice.
According to him, it “opens up the way for more differentiated and political, rather than
aesthetic valuations of cultural artifacts” (Kellner and Ryan, 1988). I completely and
totally agree with the fact that The West Wing is a great show with seasoned actors and
captivating storylines. But, at the same time, the show still ignores real life and creates
stereotypes along with promoting prejudices. For me, this writing process has been an
incredibly enriching process where I have been able to discuss much in the show that had
easily escaped my eye when I used to watch it for pure pleasure.
Chapter Eight

Conclusions: What’s in, What’s out, and What it Means

The television series *The West Wing* was on air for seven seasons beginning in the autumn of 1999 and spanned the transition from Bill Clinton’s administration to that of George W. Bush. The White House staff in the series is shown as busy devising strategies and policies, dealing with various components of the news media, trying to steer legislation through Congress, selecting nominees for key positions, conducting foreign policy and opinion polls, reacting to and dealing with events in the country and the world, and balancing personal and professional lives, too. Much of the pleasure in watching the show for me came from knowing that there are real world counterparts for characters on the series. Not all of the episodes match up to the real West Wing, but it’s in trying to locate the similarities and differences and figuring out what all of this means in a larger cultural context that has made this endeavor exciting for me. The show provides audience members with a view of the internal workings of the White House (Sorkin, Schlamme and Wells, 2002). This Emmy award winning show depicting the professional and personal experiences of a contemporary, yet fictional, President of the United States, has experienced very high levels of popularity amongst the viewers (Moreas, 2000). Surely, this verisimilitude is a large part of what makes the show compelling for me, but the ruptures between the progressive attitudes the show’s creators seem to believe they are presenting and the mainstream or even conservative attitudes that are revealed in textual analysis about gender, race, sexual orientation, and social class has become an even more important part of the viewing experience. This analysis has greatly increased my understanding of the series as a cultural artifact.
While clearly not attempting to address major policy concerns, the show did try to deal with some concerns of the characters that were modeled on real life people, which drew both praise and criticism. Muir (2000) described President Josiah Bartlet as a President for the people, who embodies the core values that the Americans hold most dear in their elected officials. Guthrie described him as “too-good-to-be-true” while others have called him “smart, funny…and decent” (Guthrie & Keveny, 2000). It has also been pointed out that the American Presidency as seen on the show is heroic but that Bartlet is shown to hold the “same insecurities and weaknesses that plague people everyday” (Parry-Giles & Parry-Giles, 223). Because of these complexities, the show has been termed as a postmodern political romance that presents a complicated ideological commentary.

Fiske has argued that the television text is a potential of meanings that are capable of being viewed with a variety of modes of attention by a variety of viewers so it is essential to examine the media texts with the lenses of gender, race, sexuality, and social class primarily because of the nature of their relationships to one another and their manifestations in everyday life. Kellner has stressed that the multicultural and multiperspectival approach, which in examining media and cultural texts through these four categories acknowledges the multiple angles of vision, unifies the dynamics of these processes. In order to combine all these perspectives for a textual reading, Kellner also calls for combining Marxist, feminist, poststructuralist, psychoanalytic, and other perspectives to understand the characteristic and defining features of media artifacts(98).

All of these four categories are contextual and are culturally constructed. They have persisted through history, but the hierarchies of these four categories are not fixed
and they constantly undergo change as a part of the new economic, political and ideological processes. Gender, race, sexuality, and social class are also social constructs whose meanings develop out of group struggles over socially valued resources (Webber, 22). The dominant culture defines the categories within gender, race and sexuality as polar opposites—white or black, men or women, heterosexual or homosexual—to create social rankings like the following: good and bad, worthy and unworthy, and right and wrong (Lorber, 1994). The dominant groups have defined gender, race, and sexuality as ranked dichotomies, and if the subordinate groups resist the binary categories and the rankings associated with them, the biological rationale is used to justify them.

It is only the category of social class that is not considered a binary, polarized or biological category. In the USA, the system is not seen as polarized between rich and poor, capitalists and workers, or middle and working classes. Rather, social class is viewed as a continuous ladder of income and resources where people can move up and down based on their efforts and not depending on biology (Vanneman & Weber Cannon, 1987). The common theme amongst all these four categories is that they are power hierarchies that let one group exert control over another to secure its position of dominance in the system, thus making these four categories the fundamental source of conflict amongst groups (Baca Zinn & Dill, 1996; Connell, 1987, 1995; Glenn, 1992; Vanneman & Webber Cannon, 1987; Weber, 1995; Weber, Hancock & Higginbotham, 1997; Wyche & Graves, 1992). A Lynn Webb clearly argues, “There can be no controlling males without women whose options are restricted; there can be no owners or managers without workers who produce the goods and services that the owners own and managers control; and there can be no heterosexual privilege without gays and lesbians
who are identified as “abnormal” or as “other” (25). A critical underlying theme for all these categories is that they simultaneously operate in every social situation both at the societal level and the individual level. These categories are social constructions that give us power and options in some areas while limit our opportunities in another. Because the categories are socially constructed, there is no absolute list of these identities that should be considered.

I have used the television series *The West Wing* as an example of a cultural media text and have analyzed the show using the multicultural and multiperspectival approach as proposed by Douglas Kellner. The categories of gender, race, sexuality, and social class have laid the framework for the previous chapters that have been supported by various methodologies as applied to different episodes from the show that have been used to support my arguments. Although these four categories help us highlight the intersections of multiple dimensions of oppression and function as power relationships, in the context of my analysis of this particular show, there is another important category I wish to propose at this point that I feel is missing from the “multiperspectival approach” that Kellner has talked about, and this is the category of disability. One important underlying theme of the show is the fact that President Bartlet is struggling with relapse-remitting multiple sclerosis, which at one point in time puts the future of his Presidency in doubt. Bartlet and his wife have concealed his illness during his initial presidential run and do not disclose the information until well into his first term, leading to allegations of fraud perpetrated upon his voters. The President also receives a Congressional censure because he covers up his MS while running for President and after his election. Josephine “Joey” Lucas is another character on the show who is also shown struggling with a
disability. She is a California based pollster and political operative played by Marlee Martin who is frequently called upon by the President’s senior staff to administer national polls and interpret polling data, and this character is deaf and always accompanied by an interpreter. She is introduced in the second season of the show, brought in by then Deputy White House Chief of Staff Josh Lyman to do the initial polling on potential public reaction to President Bartlet’s disclosure that he had MS. Disability is defined as “any restriction or lack (resulting from an impairment) of ability to perform an activity in the manner or within the range considered normal for a human being” (WHO, 1980). Disability can also be defined as the loss of faculty that results in an inability to do things or do them as well as a person of the same age and sex whose physical and mental condition is normal. Disability is the overall effect of the relevant disabilities, that is, the overall inability to perform the normal activities of life, the loss of health, strength and power to enjoy a normal existence, and people with disabilities are part of a minority group that has historically been discriminated against and marginalized by the dominant society. From this definition, disability should be included as an important component for studying media artifacts, but it is likely that other researchers will find other categories that should be included and will frame arguments about those categories in future work.

Analyzing this show as a part of a thesis project has been both fun and cumbersome at the same time. It started off as a fun experience where the idea was to only start watching a political show starring great actors only to pleasantly pass some time. This casual experience turned out to be a great revelation on a personal level when I went through the various readings and got my first true exposure to understanding and defining cultural studies. A lot of people have asked me why I chose to write my thesis
on a show which deals with the American Presidency and has characters I most likely would not be able to identify with personally. I have never really been able to come up with a response that I can say is the right answer to that question. What I can say after having completed this study is that I feel exposed to theories and methodologies that I was not even aware of before on a personal level. It has been very interesting to take a show and use various lenses to examine different components of it. Having done something like this for the first time in my life, I was nervous because I was not sure if the perspective that I bring into my analysis will make sense to my readers. In the final analysis, I think I have fared well and have been successful in learning a great deal about American culture, popular television, and myself in the process.
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