

## The More Things Change

In 1925, on the Friday night after Thanksgiving, my great-grandmother formally “entered” society at a Debutante Ball in Baltimore. She was twenty. This “coming out” event signified her “coming of age;” before that night, she had not been allowed to date. The purpose of the Ball was for her to start to meet eligible bachelors who had been preselected as appropriate for her to marry. They were all much older because the norms of the day prescribed that the man needed to already be established in a career so that he could support a wife. In fact, men who were invited to the Ball had to be at least twenty-six. She ended up marrying a man she met that evening who was twelve years her senior.

Throughout history, elaborate rituals designed to determine and limit the dating pool have been practiced in almost every segment of every culture. Consider the role of the matchmaker in the Jewish religion or arranged marriages which were -- and in some cases still are -- the norm in Indian and Arab communities. Catholics too have tried to ensure that their children marry other Catholics - all but promising that the offspring will continue practicing their religion. Although in the 100 years since my great-grandmother had her coming out much has changed within dating - driven primarily by the growing power and equality of women which accompanied the feminist movement - when you look closely at the dating culture today, centered on the relatively new invention of dating apps, it's clear that dating has actually not changed as much as might first seem evident. The world has become more globalized through technological advances. The associated compression of space and time has allowed people to connect with potential mates from almost anywhere in the world in ways they couldn't dream of 100 years ago. However, despite the internet's compression of space and time and the accompanying expectation of the

democratization of dating, today's dating culture still upholds social hierarchies and the age-old practice of limiting dating pools through the introduction of exclusive dating apps such as Raya.

In fact, dating has been democratized in many ways since my great-grandmother's time. By the time my grandmother was ready to begin dating in the 1950's, on the surface dating norms had changed considerably from the 1920's. Women and men were allowed to socialize while in high school without chaperones and women may have had more than one boyfriend before marrying. However, women still tended to marry very young because they didn't have career prospects.

Fast forward to my mom's generation, which in the 1980's was really the first where it was accepted for women to move on their own to a big city like New York, go to graduate school and have professional careers that my grandmother never would have dreamed of. That gave my mom the freedom and income to wait much longer until she got married. My mom's generation was also the first generation in which it was common to have a number of partners before settling down. But my mom was still fairly limited to the dating pool of people she had met in graduate school and through work or friends. In fact, she met my Dad on her first day of work at McKinsey. Similarly, a number of their friends in New York City married people they met in graduate school or through work. However, when my mom would break up with a boyfriend, sometimes there were fairly long gaps before she met someone new because there were so few ways to meet people.

Now, almost exactly 100 years after my great-grandmother started dating, I'm entering an age where the dating pool has few limitations in space or time and can be virtually classless and endless. Society has been slowly evolving to a much less formal culture in which the importance of family name, status and proximity have been replaced by physical attraction and academic and

business credentials. Chivalrous courting has been replaced by “hook-up” culture. Dating apps are at the forefront of this new age bringing together people from far-flung locations within seconds.

This shift did not just happen because of the internet. At the cusp of the change is the role of the feminist movement and the move towards gender equality that it enabled. Dating culture used to be centered around the man. It was the man who provided for the household, asked the girl out, and paid for dates. Now that women have so many more options to go to college and pursue professional careers, they are equals in the dating world. Their success career-wise catapulted them into a position of strength and equality. They were no longer going to college to get an “Mrs” degree; they were going to get the skills needed to have a career and support themselves. This contributed much to the change in the dating culture.

The climate of the United States really began to change in the 1960s with the “second wave of feminism.” While the first wave in the first two decades of the 1900s had been focused on women’s legal rights and suffrage (interestingly something my somewhat traditional great-grandmother had fought for as a teen), the second wave of feminism was about women’s experiences - work, politics and family. In 1965, the government signed the Equal Employment Opportunity Act, a law that enforces the prohibition of employment discrimination.<sup>1</sup> This and Title IX, passed in 1972 to prohibit sex discrimination in educational institutions that receive federal funding, helped push gender equality. That same year, 1972, Ruth Bader Ginsburg started the ACLU Women’s Rights Project, knocking down barriers for women in the workforce. These initiatives helped push colleges to become coed; for instance, in 1972 Dartmouth allowed women to attend (though it’s interesting to point out that West Coast-based USC accepted women well

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<sup>1</sup> Elinor Burkett, “Women’s Rights Movement,” Encyclopædia Britannica, Encyclopædia Britannica, 5 Mar. 2020, <https://www.britannica.com/event/womens-movement>

before some of the more traditional East Coast institutions). When my mom was growing up in the 1960s, her grandfather didn't believe women should ever work in business. Twenty years later when she entered graduate school, he offered to help pay for her education. His mindset about women had completely shifted along with most of the country's.

It was into this new world that dating apps were first launched in the 1990's. 100 years ago they never could have worked because women had so little independence and voice and so much about who they could date and marry was controlled by the family. Whether Indian, Jewish or Catholic, families wanted to ensure their daughters married men from a similar background. For these apps to work, women had to become independent from their families and capable of supporting themselves and making their own decisions. They had to be on equal footing with men. These apps represent a huge shift in societal norms. In my great-grandmother's generation, the beliefs around dating were that women had to act hard to get. Nowadays on apps, women work to make themselves look as available and attractive as possible.

These apps have become incredibly popular. In fact, dating apps now account for 20% of all committed relationships.<sup>2</sup> And there is no shortage of dating apps. One of the most successful is eHarmony, an app which uses science and research to match people. By doing empirical research on thousands of married couples, they developed statistical models that they then built into their algorithms.<sup>3</sup> And it works. The divorce rate of couples who met through eHarmony is 3.86% compared to a national U.S. divorce rate of about 50%.<sup>4</sup> But eHarmony represents just a

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<sup>2</sup> Isabel Thottam, "10 Online Dating Statistics (for U.S.) You Should Know | Eharmony," Eharmony, eHarmony, Accessed 23 Sept. 2020, <https://www.eharmony.com/online-dating-statistics/#:~:text=20%25%20of%20current%2C%20committed%20relationships%20began%20online&text=So%20where%20are%20people%20finding.met%20on%20a%20dating%20website>

<sup>3</sup> "So, What Is the Science Behind EHarmony?," eHarmony, eHarmony, Accessed 23 Sept. 2020, <https://www.eharmony.com/blog/science-behind-eharmony/>

<sup>4</sup> "EHarmony Ranks #1 for Most Online Marriages and Marital Satisfaction in Groundbreaking Marriage Data Published in Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences (PNAS)\*," Business Wire, Business Wire, 3 June 2013, <https://www.businesswire.com/news/home/20130603006491/en/eHarmony-Ranks-1-for-Most-Online-Marriages-and-Marital->

small segment of the dating app market. Tinder has fifty-seven million users worldwide, with Americans accounting for only about eight million of them.<sup>5</sup> People from countries as far-flung as Germany, UK, and Brazil are able to connect instantaneously with each other, further demonstrating the internet's ability to shrink the world.

However, the democratization of dating and its associated compression of time and space is now coming full circle as a new kind of dating apps are growing in popularity – ones that are by invitation only and once again limit the pool of available mates to some pre-selected group. Consider Raya, for which you need a referral to even apply to join. With its 8% acceptance rate, lower than USC's, a committee decides whether to accept you based on how many followers you have and how successful you are. The app now boasts celebrities such as Cara Delevigne, Trevor Noah and Ben Affleck.<sup>6</sup> Although this app demonstrates the enormous shift from the time when mate selection was based on family name and status to personal branding and career, it also shows that people are still intent on finding some way to narrow the available pool to what they consider appropriate mates. Nowadays, women who want to get on that app need to be successful in some way, further emphasizing the shift from the woman as the housewife. Though we think society has come a long way in being more inclusive, Raya demonstrates how we are genetically programmed to seek and respect hierarchies. Jordan Peterson's book *12 Rules for Life* talks about how competence hierarchies are a part of nature going far back into evolutionary history. Even lobsters have status-forming rituals and techniques (Peterson). Therefore, there's always going to be some form of a class system in dating; only the credentials have changed.

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[Satisfaction-in-Groundbreaking-Marriage-Data-Published-in-Proceedings-of-the-National-Academy-of-Sciences-PNAS-#:~:text=%20Data%20also%20show](#)

<sup>5</sup> Mansoor Iqbal, "Tinder Revenue and Usage Statistics (2020) - Business of Apps," Business of Apps, 21 Aug. 2017, <https://www.businessofapps.com/data/tinder-statistics/>

<sup>6</sup> Hillary Hoffower, "What Is Raya? Inside the Elite Celebrity Dating App for the Rich - Business Insider," Business Insider, Business Insider, 30 Dec. 2019, <https://www.businessinsider.com/what-is-raya-elite-celebrity-dating-app-rich-famous-2019-12#:~:text=But%20it's%20unofficially%20known%20as,reportedly%20been%20spotted%20on%20it>

At the Ball, my great-grandmother was expected to meet the man she was to marry out of about sixty eligible bachelors. Today, my possibilities are virtually endless. Dating culture is fundamentally different from back then, and gender equality made this possible because relationships are no longer centered around the man. However, through dating apps such as Raya, it's clear that culture has not actually changed as much as it might appear. There will always be social hierarchies and people will attempt to mate within their group. Only the credentials have changed. There is still a pedigree attached to dating; it's just a different pedigree. So even though society has come a long way since my great-grandmother, in a sense it's really just been one big circle.

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