






## The Representation of Girlhood, Womanhood and Feminism

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**Abstract:** Nowadays, media has become one of the main sources of education, complementing the educational process of schools and families. In this way, television series are creators of narratives that alter the perception of one's own identity and of society. In this article, we analyse the representation of gender in three selected episodes from one of the most popular series on Netflix that promotes a feminist narrative, *Sex Education*. As a methodological approach to describe and analyse the representations of womanhood and feminism, we use critical discourse analysis (CDA) from a gender perspective. We have found that the female protagonists are represented as being subject to adversity as a result of misogyny that they, at times, also perform alongside their male counterparts. Nonetheless, they act in solidarity with each other when this adversity arises given their shared experiences of misogyny which helps them to come to some sort of resolution that brings them closer together, and in some cases, they have access to resources to give them moments of catharsis or closure. We consider that media literacy is the ideal strategy to develop the capacity for critical analysis of audio-visual content and to introduce the analysis of gender representations in the media.

**Keywords:** Feminism

### *La representación de la niñez, la feminidad y el feminismo*

**Resumen:** Hoy en día los medios de comunicación se han convertido en una de las principales fuentes de educación, complementando el proceso educativo de las escuelas y las familias. De esta forma, las series de televisión son creadoras de narrativas que alteran la percepción de la propia identidad y de la sociedad. En este artículo, analizamos la representación de género en tres episodios de una de las series más populares en Netflix que promueve una narrativa feminista, *Sex Education*. Como aproximación metodológica para describir y analizar las representaciones de la feminidad y la feminidad, utilizamos el análisis crítico del discurso (ACD) desde una perspectiva de género. Hemos encontrado que mientras que las protagonistas femeninas son representadas como sujetas a la adversidad como resultado de la misoginia y a veces también realizan junto a sus contrapartes masculinas dicha acción. Sin embargo, se observa que se presenta una solidaridad grupal cuando entienden que comparten experiencias de misoginia que los ayuda a llegar a algún tipo de resolución que les une. Consideramos que la alfabetización mediática es la estrategia idónea para desarrollar la capacidad de análisis crítico de los contenidos audiovisuales e introducir el análisis de las representaciones de género en los medios.

**Palabra clave:** Feminismo

### Introduction

Nowadays, media has become one of the main sources of education, complementing the educational process of schools and families (Aparici, 2005, Aguasanta-Regalado et al., 2022). In this sense, television provides young people with knowledge, behaviour models and values that shape how they see themselves and others (Mastro, 2017; Ramasubramanian & Sousa, 2019).

Buonanno (1999) explains that television series create narratives that alter the perception of one's own identity and of society. These authors emphasise that, rather than transgressing social parameters, these series maintain conservative aspects of

identity and society in their stories. This is reflected in the role of women in these audio-visual stories, given that narratives of advances in gender equality are presented without actually depicting gender equality itself.

For this reason, Delgado et al. (2007) remark that to study these audio-visual stories means analysing social imaginaries, collective memory and diverse identities.

Different studies (Coronado & Galán, 2015; García-Muñoz & Fedele, 2011b; Mateos-Pérez & Ochoa, 2016a; Sangro & Plaza, 2010) reflect on the representation of women and the feminine in the media, highlighting the invisibility and stereotypical presentation of such characters. Recently, studies can be found (Hernández-Carrillo, 2022; Garrido & Zaptsi, 2021; Maroto González & Rodríguez Martelo, 2022; Menéndez Menéndez & Fernández-Morales, 2023; Uli & Martín, 2022; Zambrano et al., 2023) that analyse the impacts of representation, drawing links between the role of feminism in the story and how it creates the visibility of new identities.

Given the promotion of equality of opportunities in educational reform, the gender models and identities disseminated by the media are hence of interest to us, especially the images of women and of those who embody a combination of masculine and feminine expressions (Mateos-Pérez & Ochoa, 2016b).

Therefore, we consider media education, when employed as a tool alongside gender studies, cultural studies, and critical race theory that, can contribute to fighting against media representations that favour dominance systems of power (Leurs et al., 2018).

### **Objectives**

In this article, we analyse the representation of womanhood in three selected episodes from *Sex Education* as outlined below and the extent to which these episodes promote a feminist narrative. Our objectives are:

1. To analyse the representation of girlhood and womanhood in the series *Sex Education*.
2. To investigate the extent to which the series *Sex Education* promotes a feminist narrative.

### **Method**

As a methodological approach to describe and analyse the representations of womanhood and feminism, we use critical discourse analysis (CDA) from a gender perspective. This research follows an analytical and interpretative nature, and we thus use CDA as a tool to examine biases and inequalities in social representations (Van-Dijk, 1999), in this case being the series *Sex Education*. Weiss and Wodak (2003) explain that this method allows us to read the representations and reveal their power to reproduce circumstances of domination.

The object of study is the Netflix series *Sex Education* (created by Laurie Nunn), given its great popularity among the teenage public. The analysis begins with the exploration of the 24 episodes that make up the three seasons of the show. We have decided to take three episodes of the series as units of analysis in order to carry out a microanalysis (Zunzunegui, 1996). We have chosen episode 5, season 1; episode 7, season 2; and episode 3, season 3 as our sample, following a preliminary revision of the series' 24 episodes.

## Results

The series, *Sex Education*, revolves around the fictional secondary school Moordale and around the lives of students, teachers, and parents as they navigate relationships, intimacy and identity.

Set out in the following section are the results obtained from the analysis of each chosen episode to examine the representation of girlhood and womanhood and the extent to which the series promotes feminism. First, we chronologically outline the most significant scenes in each of the episodes. By significant, here we mean the scenes that are integral to the plot and character development, giving meaning to the series, and also the scenes that represent girls and women as well as a feminist (or lack thereof) discourse. These scenes are thus the key scenes for us to analyse in order to fulfil our objectives. Following this, we illustrate our results according to our framework analysis to answer our research objectives.

### ***Episode 5 Season 1: Revenge Porn and Solidarity***

In episode 5 season 1, we witness an incident of revenge porn when a picture of the character Ruby's genitalia is sent around the school to other students in an attempt to emotionally blackmail her into apologising for the way she badly treats people, or the culprit will reveal her face. As the students speculate as to whom the genitalia belong, commenting on the number of pubes and size of the labia, we witness the deep misogyny and stigmas surrounding vulvas. The storyline immediately confronts the very troubling misconception among teenage girls that there is a 'normal', and therefore 'abnormal', type of vulva that has been promoted by the media (Skoda et al., 2021). Even Ruby actively participates in shaming the genitalia, despite it being her own, in order to distance herself from it as well as make sure she is not ousted from her group of friends for being the person in the photo.

Despite the representation of misogyny and stigmas in this context, this episode is instrumental in producing legally correct information about the law surrounding the issue of revenge porn. When Maeve approaches Otis, the school's unofficial sex advice guru, about investigating who sent the picture of Ruby, he quite rightly states that Ruby should 'go to the police. It's a criminal offence.' Through the voice of Otis, the series quite correctly informs the viewer of what is commonly known as the 'revenge porn' offence, which charges those who "deliberately disclose private sexual images with intent to cause distress" (Criminal Justice and Courts Act, 2015). Here, the series asserts itself as a tool for education of viewers on issues surrounding misogyny and revenge porn and therefore promotes itself as a tool for feminist teaching.

The episode also illustrates the solidarity that girls, women, and sometimes men and boys, can have with each other as a means of creating a counternarrative around the stigmatisation of 'abnormal' vulvas as well as of women's sexualities. Maeve decides to help Ruby investigate who sent the photo out of solidarity with Ruby and the assertion that 'no one deserves to be shamed', explaining that rumours of her sexual promiscuity and salaciousness were started by a boy who she refused to kiss at a party, and have since which spiralled. Maeve's explanation of her desire to help Ruby demonstrates the extent to which slut-shaming can actively impact on the victims' behaviour and regulate how they engage with others as a result (Ringrose & Renold, 2014).

When it comes to light that it was Ruby's best friend, Olivia, who sent the picture, Olivia tries to reconcile with her and justify her actions, but Ruby, understandably, rejects her. However, we again witness a wave of solidarity among the girls in the following assembly

when the Head Teacher addresses the issue and is met with heckles from the students about the image belonging to Ruby. Olivia stands up and claims the picture as her own, followed by Maeve making the same claim, then a wave of other students, including boys, who also claim the photo. This moment is reminiscent of an iconic moment in Kubrick's 1960 film *Spartacus*, where the slaves around Spartacus claim to be him to share his punishment, declaring 'I am Spartacus'. The moment, and the figure of Spartacus, have become symbols of freedom and solidarity in different historical and cultural contexts (Rodrigues, 2017, p.35) and here, the series recontextualises this in adolescent feminism. We witness the importance of solidarity in refusing to accept misogynistic narratives, in this case about vulvas and women's bodies in general, and Olivia and Ruby reconcile in that moment as they hold hands triumphantly.

### ***Episode 7 Season 2: Abuse and Rage***

We now go on to analyse episode 7 season 2 when six of the girls are caught laughing at vandalism on the changing room walls slut-shaming their teacher and are given detention, as they are assumed to be the culprits.

Situating this misogynistic vandalism in the girls' locker room is a subversion how misogynistic, and often homophobic, behaviour has typically been represented as occurring in the boys' locker room, a space where "myths and truths about sexuality and gender are both created and challenged" (Chawansky, 2010, p.171-2). As the girls gather to laugh about the statement addressing their teacher's promiscuity, the piece of vandalism does indeed create myths and truths about the sexuality of their teacher as something that is worthy of their attention and amusement. Meanwhile, in portraying the girls as coming together in amusement over the vandalism, the series equally challenges myths and truths about gender (and equality) by demonstrating the misogyny that is conveyed and reinforced by the girls' amusement; that is to say that sexism is alive and well, not just perpetuated by men and boys, and thus reinforcing the need for feminism despite arguments otherwise (Gill, 2016).

During their detention, Miss Sands, the teacher who is the object of the vandalism, tells the girls to create a presentation on what 'binds [them] together as women', later describing this as 'an impossible assignment on female solidarity'. With this task and the way that she describes it, Miss Sands quite succinctly sums up much intersectional feminist thought that rejects the common struggle of women given a lack of one common identity to which 'woman' can be reduced (Crenshaw, 1989; Brah & Phoenix, 2004; Butler, 2006).

Nevertheless, as the girls talk to try and complete this task, their conversation turns to sexual harassment and abuse when Aimee suddenly snaps, bursting into tears, as she continues to process an episode of sexual abuse that she experienced on the bus on the way to school. Each of the other girls then share their own experiences with sexual harassment and abuse: Olivia was groped at the train station; Viv was confronted with indecent bodily exposure in a swimming pool; and Ola was followed home from work until the man saw her father.

In representing these instances of sexual abuse, the series helps to create a dialogue around the issue of sexual abuse which some viewers might not otherwise consider to be a common occurrence. A common trend in the different stories of abuse expressed by the girls is that they all occur in moments of movement and transition from one place to another: on the bus, at the train station, in the swimming pool, and walking home. The series represents the girls as being literally impeded from moving through the world because of the abuse that stops them in their tracks. As Ahmed (2006) states, "[t]o be

orientated is also to be turned toward certain objects, those that help us to find our way” (p.1) and as a result of these instances, the girls become disoriented as they try to turn away from certain objects and lose their way. This is exemplified by Aimee declaring that she ‘can’t get on the stupid bus!’, illustrating how she has lost her means of movement and is therefore made static, both physically and mentally in the way she cannot take her mind of the event. Alongside these representations are the factually correct statistics voiced by Viv that ‘[t]wo third of girls experience unwanted sexual attention or contact in public spaces before the ages of 21’ (Plan International, 2018), thus bringing to attention the sheer scale of the issue in the context of the real world that viewers exist in.

However, after having shared these stories, the girls conclude that they are bound together as women through their experiences with ‘non-consensual penises’ and being treated like they are ‘public property’. Through Miss Sands’ challenge, the girls come together by situating their joint womanhood in, and reducing it to, their experiences with sexual harassment and abuse from men. The series therefore refuses any intersectionality and perpetuates a dangerous narrative about the identity of ‘woman’ as singularly formed by its relationship to misogynistic oppression. It hence reinforces Butler’s (2006) condemnation of the “urgency of feminism to establish a universal status for patriarchy [that] has occasionally motivated the shortcut to a categorial or fictive universality of the structure of domination, held to produce women’s common subjugated experience” (p. 5).

To deal with their anger and upset over their respective and communal situations, the girls go to a scrap heap to smash things up. This moment illustrates the importance of having an outlet for your emotions to be able to process traumatic experiences. All the girls destroy discarded objects in an act that could be considered a crescendo of feminist rage against the patriarchy, where feminist rage has become a lot more visible and popular in media representations since the late 2010s (Kay, 2019).

Of note is the fact that this moment is led by Aimee, albeit encouraged by the other girls sitting back as spectators around her. By placing Aimee as the initiator of the violence, the series chooses to use the most palatable character of those involved in this scene to initiate the anger. Here, we take palatable to mean that she embodies ideals of class, femininity, sexuality, and race, in that her family is extremely wealthy, and she is cisgender and feminine, heterosexual, and white, and none of the other girls present in this scene embody this. These ideals combine to produce a respectable body that is considered valuable to society and therefore taken care of (Skeggs, 2004). This, by extension, makes the anger itself more palatable and less threatening because Aimee represents the white supremacist patriarchal ideal of a woman that is protected by and not threatening to the white supremacist patriarchal society which we live in.

### ***Episode 3 Season 3: Resolution and Knowledge Production***

In this section, we will investigate episode 3 season 3, exploring the resolution of trauma and self-care as Aimee seeks therapy and how the series comes to assert itself as a producer of knowledge through its conversations around and representations of the diversity of vulvas.

Following the episode where Aimee is sexually assaulted in season 2, the difficulties she has with her mental health and relationship to her body as a result continue to impact on her into season 3, so she starts therapy with Dr. Jean Milburn. In the session, Aimee states: ‘I used to like my body, I used to like having sex. But ever since it happened, I don’t like the way my body feels. I don’t like looking at it. And I don’t like my boyfriend touching it anymore.’ Through her words, the series presents the ways one’s relationship

to one's body can change following an episode of physical harm or abuse and the long-term side-effects of the aforementioned dis-orientation that force us to find our way again (Ahmed, 2006). This is summed up by Dr. Milburn as 'mov[ing] you towards healing your relationship with your body again.' Dr. Milburn makes it clear that this is something that can be achieved, and that Aimee has done well to seek out help in the first place to overcome the struggles that she is facing.

However, the series makes the same mistake as it does in season 2 episode 7 of presenting Aimee, out of all the girls who verbalised and struggle with their experiences of sexual harassment and abuse, as the only one who obtains therapy, and so reinforces the same narrative that she is the only one truly worthy of care because she embodies ideals of respectability (Skeggs, 2004). This is a dangerous narrative as it reflects an already existing trend of white people consistently reporting higher rates of access to mental health care than other ethnic minorities (Cook et al., 2017) and when ethnic minorities do receive treatment, it is likely of a much poorer quality (Shim et al., 2009). Although the causes for these trends as a product of structural racism are far beyond the scope of this article, this representation is striking in the context of these trends in the real world, showing the girl who occupies structural privilege as white, straight, cisgender, and middle-class as the one to be portrayed as worthy of therapy to overcome her trauma. The series risks reinforcing these trends; there will be viewers who identify with Aimee as a character and her experiences despite not belonging to the same demographics as her but may not seek out the help they deserve because the series makes a clear distinction between her, as being the one deserves therapy, and the other girls who belong to different minority demographics and who do not deserve therapy.

The series uses Aimee's therapy appointment with Dr Milburn, who is a sex therapist, as a springboard not only to illustrate the diversity of vulvas both to the characters in the show and the viewers at home, but also to produce knowledge about vulvas in the real world. During her therapy session, Aimee sees a model of a vulva in Dr Milburn's office and comments on the fact that her vulva does not look the same, to which Dr Milburn responds that vulvas come in all different shapes, sizes, and colours, thus promoting a pro-vulva narrative that embraces all different types. Dr Milburn recommends a website to Aimee that 'highlights the wide variety of different vulvas' which we then see Aimee looking through at home. We see shots of both Aimee's face and the screen as she scrolls down and clicks through the website, and we, as the viewer, quite clearly see the URL of the website: '<https://www.all-vulvas-are-beautiful.com/>'. This is a real website that was set up between Netflix and an Instagram account called The Vulva Gallery, which publishes drawings of vulvas in all shapes, colours, and sizes, and here on the website these images are published with anecdotal stories about the person to whom the vulva belongs. At the top of the homepage is a picture of Aimee that we see scrolling through and the statement that the website was set up to 'to normalise talking about vulvas, celebrating beautifully diverse vulvas in all shapes and sizes' (All Vulvas Are Beautiful).

## Discussion

As explained by Garrido and Zapsi (2021), we can consider the series to be feminist given the quantity of relevant female protagonists, as well as the feminist representation. However, it is important to analyse the gender representations that reinforce the evermore popular feminist aesthetic, which require critical responses alongside the archaic representations of misogyny (Gill, 2016).

We have found that the female protagonists are represented as being subject to adversity as a result of misogyny that they, at times, also perform alongside their male counterparts. Nonetheless, they act in solidarity with each other when this adversity

arises given their shared experiences of misogyny which helps them to come to some sort of resolution that brings them closer together, and in some cases, they have access to resources to give them moment of catharsis or closure. Although the series illustrates several different issues that arise in feminist discourse as well as a diversity of women and girls among whom they play out and on whom they impact, the series at times ends up reinforcing problematic narratives within feminism and doesn't assert an intersectional reflexivity because it presents certain women as more worthy than others.

If we think about the episode of revenge porn, this can be considered a representation of feminism such that it demonstrates the coming together of women, and men, to counter dangerous narratives about women and marginalised bodies. However, we question the extent to which this is a positive representation because this coming together is fundamentally premised on the illegal act of Olivia sharing this image to begin with, and for which we see no subsequent action taken. Moreover, this act of feminist solidarity and unity, both from the student body in assembly as well as from Maeve in her decision to help Ruby, is a consequence of the misogyny that they are subject to and that forces them to act together instead of allowing them to act in solidarity with each other of their own volition, outside of the constraints of misogyny.

This story of revenge porn alongside that of the slut-shaming of Miss Sands and the way that the girls take part in this as by-standers illustrates the way that girls perpetuate misogyny alongside men. This sheds light on the way that girls attempt to assert the dominant culture, that, in this case, is the patriarchal order which vilifies women's bodies and sexualities, in the hope of asserting themselves as belonging with those around them, given that sisterhood is "premised upon certain criteria for inclusion" (Lazar, 2006, p.515) which not everyone may embody.

By including stories of sexual assault and harassment in the narrative and demonstrating the vast extent to which this is experienced by young girls through their varying stories as well as factually correct statistics on the topic, the series gives viewers who may have been disoriented by sexual abuse themselves a chance to re-orient themselves in relation to these characters to whom they can relate. This in turn encourages young girls and women viewers who may have experienced this to feel that they are not alone and, by verbalising the issue, creates a positive conversation in the very act of daring to talk about it, therefore furthering a feminist narrative by facilitating and broadcasting difficult conversations about misogyny. Be that as it may, we must not let this positive impact override the danger of reducing womanhood to their relationship with assault and misogyny in general. This merely runs the risk of encouraging their viewers, especially those who are teenage girls, to relate to the characters on screen not through other shared interests and character traits, but merely through their own experiences with 'non-consensual penises and risks erasing the diversity of experiences that exist outside of one's relationship to misogyny and which constitute what it means to be a woman.

Furthermore, by situating Aimee as the initiator of violence and anger in this episode, the series reinforces already deeply entrenched classist, racist, and misogynistic ideas about which women get to be angry, where black, working class, queer, and/or trans women have historically been highly criminalised and demonised for just existing, let alone for expressing violence and anger (Cohen, 1997; Edelman, 2014; Lorde, 2017). By extension, the series transmits a message about the importance of feminist anger, but only when certain people are the leaders of it, thus evoking outdated tropes of white middle-class feminine cisgender straight women needing to be the leaders of feminist movements.

In the last episode, the series turns to represent the importance of resolution and (self-) help following trauma as we see Aimee seek therapy to deal with the sexual assault. In this way, the series demonstrates the importance of understanding that sexual abuse does not have to define your life and that there are tools out there to help young girls recover from it and find resolution from their trauma, despite it potentially being difficult or uncomfortable. However, by representing Aimee as the girl to seek out help out of all the girls who have verbalised their experiences with sexual assault, the series again reinforces outdated ideals within feminism and about women, regarding who deserves to be protected, believed, and saved. Given how representations do not merely reflect reality but actively participate in it by allowing the onlooker to derive meaning from them in the real world (Disch, 2016), this representation could go on to negatively impact the way that viewers may seek out or access help to overcome past traumas according to if they consider themselves demographically identified with Aimee's character, or not.

As a result of this therapy appointment, the series starts a conversation about the diversity of vulvas. By creating a platform in the real world about the diversity of vulvas in a matter of fact, personal, and individualised way, the series asserts itself as feminist epistemology in that it considers the dangerous stigmas surrounding vulvas and actively works to address and undo them. It does so by equipping its viewers with resources that challenge hegemonic misogynistic ideas about vulvas, thus demonstrating the importance of the power to see as the power to know, and the power to know as the power to challenge hegemony (Haraway, 1988; Scott, 1991; Code, 2014). In this way, the series continues the same narrative about de-stigmatising women's bodies and vulvas as is the case in the episode of revenge porn, and not only does the series attempt to educate viewers on the diversity of vulvas but actively creates resources to fulfil this purpose further.

In this sense, our results show that the series represents girlhood and womanhood in a way that is relatable to viewers by illustrating the very real difficulties that girls and women suffer. Much of the adversity that we witness in these three episodes is linked to patriarchal systems of oppression, such as revenge porn, sexual assault and stigmatisation of bodies, which the series uses as springboards to start wider discussions around the subjects and thus to demonstrate the importance of process, resolution and closure. Therefore, we can assert that the series promotes a feminist narrative by addressing issues within feminist discourse, helping to further conversations around these topics, and producing resources and hence knowledge. Nonetheless, we consider that the series fails to promote an intersectional feminist narrative by subsuming the identity of woman into one homogenous identity that is singularly in relation to misogyny, despite a diversity of representation. The series similarly presents the character Aimee as the girl who is most protected by those around her and hence places the white, middle-class, cisgender, straight girl at the centre of the narrative, without reflection upon the impact of this representation.

Finally, we consider that media literacy is the ideal strategy to develop the capacity for critical analysis of audio-visual content. Even more importantly, we advocate for the analysis of gender representations that, in theory, illustrate diversity and thus reinforce the increasingly popular 'feminist' aesthetic in the media, but nonetheless can be shown to have damaging depictions of minority genders. These representations require equally critical responses as with archaic representations of misogyny (Gill, 2016) in order to continually consider their educational impact on young people.



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