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Undergraduate Dissertation

Trabajo Fin de Grado

"What binds you together as women?":

Depiction of Sexual Assault and Trauma
in *Sex Education* as 4th Wave Feminism

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ABSTRACT

This undergraduate dissertation explores the didactic potential of the sexual assault storyline found in the second season of *Sex Education* (Nunn, 2019-). Particularly, it examines how it facilitates the recognition of such traumatic experiences and depicts the ideal response of sorority through a liberal feminist lens, echoing the #MeToo movement within the context of fourth-wave feminism. With this purpose, the essay introduces cinematic representations of the different feminist waves, focusing on the latest and the #MeToo movement itself. Subsequently, an analysis of the five-episode storyline explores the traumatic process, from its actual perpetration until the point when the victim begins her healing journey, highlighting the long-time impact of the aggression and its psychological consequences. The dissertation concludes that this process demands the victim to redefine her identity, in what could be considered as an empowerment quest towards a more educated, aware, and multi-faceted version of herself.

Keywords: #MeToo; Fourth Wave Feminism; *Sex Education*; Sexual Assault; Trauma; Sorority

RESUMEN

Este trabajo de fin de grado explora el potencial didáctico de la línea argumental de agresión sexual perteneciente a la segunda temporada de *Sex Education* (Nunn, 2019-). En particular, examina cómo facilita el reconocimiento de dichas experiencias traumáticas y representa el ideal de sororidad a través de una perspectiva feminista liberal, haciéndose eco del movimiento #MeToo en un contexto de feminismo de la cuarta ola. Con este propósito, el ensayo introduce representaciones fílmicas de las diferentes olas feministas, centrándose en la última y en el movimiento #MeToo en sí mismo. Posteriormente, mediante el análisis de los cinco episodios que configuran la trama, el texto navega a través del proceso traumático, desde la perpetración del abuso hasta el momento en el que la víctima comienza su curación, destacando el efecto a largo plazo de la agresión y sus correspondientes consecuencias psicológicas. Finalmente, se demuestra cómo el proceso exige a la víctima la re-definición de su identidad, en lo que podría considerarse la búsqueda de su propio empoderamiento hacia una versión más instruida, sensibilizada y polifacética de sí misma.

Palabras clave: #MeToo; Feminismo de la Cuarta Ola; *Sex Education*; Agresión sexual; Trauma; Sororidad

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. Introduction.....	4
2. Theoretical Framework.....	7
2.1 Waves of feminism and sexual violence onscreen.....	7
2.2 #MeToo Movement.....	10
3. Analysis.....	13
3.1 Perpetuation: “I got jizz on my jeans.”.....	13
3.2 Trauma: “I don’t like you touching me anymore.”.....	16
3.3 Healing: “It’s just a stupid bus.”.....	19
4. Conclusion.....	26
5. Works Cited.....	28
6. Films and Series Cited.....	32

1. INTRODUCTION

Sexual violence is defined as “any form of direct or indirect sexually-based abuse, assault, harassment, exploitation and/or intimidation” perpetrated by any person, regardless of their relationship with the victim (Alaggia and Wang 2). To get a sense of the magnitude of the issue, the World Health Organization estimates that roughly 30% of women (1 in 3) worldwide have suffered some kind of unwanted sexual behaviour. However, statistics should not fail to recognise the special vulnerability of certain groups of women who are more prone to experience abuse (e.g. younger, ethnic minorities, those affected by disabilities, or transgender). Since its earliest acknowledgement by second-wave feminists, public denunciation and rejection of sexual misconduct has constituted a key element in the growing conversation, which reached its peak with 2017’s #MeToo movement, usually linked to the fourth wave of feminism.

In an Anglo-American context, current feminism is understood and materialised through “visible and accessible” popular media texts, which emphasize “visibility over action”, raising concerns about how it becomes a “mainstream story” (Boyle 2). SVOD systems like Netflix, targeting multinational subscribers over a national “mass audience”, are able to produce content addressing different “tastes and sensibilities” that are not often approached in prevailing television (Lotz 2007). *Sex Education* (Nunn, 2019 - present) comprises an outstanding illustration of the above, as by means of teen-genre tropes, aims to fill a gap found in formal educative frameworks regarding contemporary teenagers’ understanding of sexuality and its practice (Dudek et al. 11). Over three seasons, the series has explored different aspects of sexuality, including a “smorgasbord of sexualities” (gay, lesbian, bisexuality, and asexuality), practices not limited to traditional sexual intercourse (fingering, anal sex, oral sex, masturbation, or BDSM) and other issues including STD’s, erectile dysfunction, vaginismus,

abortion, porn, and, of most interest for this undergraduate dissertation, sexual assault (Horeck, “Getting Back”).

As Horeck (“Better Worlds”) also notes, the previously mentioned aspects are explored through a comedic -yet didactic- tone, by means of “well-established character arcs and storylines developed across seasons”. The starting point sets inexperienced sex-expert Otis (Asa Butterfield) and independent punk-feminist Maeve (Emma Mackey) aiming to provide sexual knowledge to their high-school colleagues whilst dealing with their own personal dilemmas. Over the course of the episodes, all the characters’ emotional immaturity is evidenced. However, the series intends to convey their different experiences of growth and development thanks to the education they receive throughout the seasons. While all the characters’ arcs are relevant and demonstrate the significance of the series, it can be said that the one depicted by Aimee (Aimee Lou Wood), Maeve’s best friend, is one of the most emotional and striking. Despite being an apparently naive blonde girl who embodies the ideals of class and heteronormativity, she will become a victim of sexual assault, which will force her to redefine her identity through an empowerment quest. During 5 episodes in season 2, *Sex Education* explores the way she copes with the aftermath of the assault, which, at first, she is even reluctant to name as such (Horeck, “Better Worlds”). Social realism plays a key role in the didacticism of the storyline, as by addressing Aimee’s non-linear process of trauma, as well as her friends’ response to it, an impressive representation -and validation- of victimhood is delivered, enhanced by hints of liberal feminism. It is also relevant to highlight the paratextuality in which the audiovisual product was released, during the worldwide outrage around Harvey Weinstein’s scandal that led to the #MeToo movement. Moreover, even though Aimee could not be considered as creator Laurie Nunn’s surrogate, she has declared that the sexual assault storyline acts as the cathartic outcome of a personal experience from her own life (Famurewa).

The objective of this undergraduate dissertation is to explore the didactic potential inherent in Aimee's sexual assault storyline from the second season of *Sex Education*. Specifically, it will seek to analyse the ways in which it may facilitate the recognition and processing of such traumatic experiences, as well as modelling the exemplary response of sorority through an educated, liberal feminist perspective, echoing today's #MeToo Era. The essay starts with a brief contextualization of the depiction of the different waves of feminism on screen, focusing on the contrast found in the representation of sexual abuse before and after #MeToo. This will be followed by an analysis of Aimee's narrative, which will be divided into three sections. The first one will address the actual assault (episode 3), the second section will deal with the evolution of Aimee's trauma through time (episodes 3, 4, 5, 6 and 7), and the last one will be devoted to the -beginning of the- resolution thanks to her feminist support network (episode 7), and the discussion of the white-washing controversy of the #MeToo movement, as depicted in the series.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Waves of feminism and sexual violence onscreen.

The ongoing cinematic depictions of sexual harassment, abuse, and rape, either as a central or overlooked theme, evidence the structural problem in which any form of sexual violation can be “celebrated or trivialised culturally and socially” (Boyle 75). Therefore, despite the paratextual context surrounding audiovisual texts, the cultural normalisation of sexual misconduct can be analysed from a current feminist perspective.

According to Rentschler, feminists from the mid-1970s coined the term “rape culture” to hint at “the cultural practices that reproduce and justify the perpetration of violence” (67). Mainstream media’s portrayal of rape culture may range from overtly parodic misogynistic gags to the explicit depiction of rape, showing the complexity of the analysed issue. While examples of this span all eras and genres, illustrations of the former can be seen in the film *Grease* during the performance of “*Summer Nights*” and in *The Wolf of Wall Street*, as Jordan Belfort’s behaviour towards the flight attendants establishes his male dominance. On the other hand, films like *Pillow Talk* depict forms of sexual harassment that may go unnoticed by some viewers, such as unwanted physical contact. In *Some Like It Hot*, ambiguous intentions of rape are portrayed, as Daphne tries to get Sugar drunk in order to have sex with her. In some instances, the theme of rape can even be used as a plot device, reinforcing the normalization of rape culture, as in *The Godfather* and *Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri*. Ultimately, explicit depictions of rape, such as *Last Tango in Paris* and *Game of Thrones*, raised ethical concerns and highlighted the need for critical analysis of the portrayal of sexual violence in popular media.

In response to such a broadly problematic and destructive atmosphere towards women, a new cinematic movement emerged. By switching the focalization to the victims of sexual abuse and focusing on the roots of restorative justice and the need for accountability of the

offenders, a new approach to the depiction of sexual misconduct was introduced, synchronous to the uprising of Fourth Wave Feminism.

The diverse array of concepts that emerged as a result of the development of feminist waves and theories facilitated the production of films depicting the evolution of feminist thought. For instance, *Suffragette* and *Iron Jawed Angels* are examples of motion pictures dealing with the women's suffrage movement that characterized the First Wave of Feminism. However, while *Suffragette* is set in the UK, and focuses on the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) led by Emmeline Pankhurst which achieved the women's vote in 1918, after the Representation of the People Act (Stevenson, 1004), the latter portrays the story of Alice Paul and Lucy Burns, two American suffragists who played a significant role in the ratification of the 19th Amendment in 1920. Minor (yet still significant) depictions are found in *Mary Poppins* with Mrs Banks' performance of "Sister Suffragette" or even in the acclaimed Netflix film *Enola Holmes*. Despite not explicitly mentioning the movement, the main character in this film is clearly influenced by the spirit of the suffragettes.

Even if Betty Friedan's writings in *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) ensured that after 1920 "feminism was dead" (123), she founded the National Organization of Women (NOW) that, among others, helped in the process of "consciousness-raising" regarding women's oppression in equal pay and rights at work, reproduction rights and equal representation in public bodies, recognizing that "the personal is political" (Thornham 25-35). The previously mentioned social issues are explored in Nigel Cole's *Made in Dagenham*, depicting the Ford sewing machinist strike of 1968 aiming for equal pay for women, and in the Hulu series *Mrs America*, which navigates through the process of ratification and backlash of the Equal Rights Amendment in the U.S. Both can be considered striking representations of the Anglo-American Second Wave of Feminism (or Women's Liberation Movement) that took place between the 1960s and 1980s. Furthermore, second-wave feminists were the first "to recognize rape and

sexual harassment as endemic social problems” (Cobb and Horeck 489) highlighting “the political nature of their personal experiences through (...) public speak-outs” (Loney-Howes 28). However, as Rhode (381) explains, it was not until the 1980s that the EEOC and the U.S. Supreme Court prohibited sexual harassment by law.

Third Wave Feminism, on the other hand, was officially announced by Rebecca Walker in 1992 in her article “Becoming the Third Wave” and focused on intersectionality, shifting “from debates around equality to (...) debates around difference” in order to “disrupt a white, heteronormative, middle-class view” (Rivers 10). Postfeminism (or “Lipstick feminism”) was a movement within the Third Wave that embraced “girly culture and femininity” and consumerism (Cossman 44), as well as “individualism, choice, and empowerment” (Gill 147). The female leading characters of *Bridget Jones’ Diary* and *Sex and the City* can be considered postfeminist role models, as they are caught in postmodern anxieties (such as loneliness and the fear of ageing childless) while enjoying their apparent independence.

As popular culture and current discussions of feminism have highly embraced third-wave sensibility, “it is hard to tell where postfeminism ends and the fourth wave begins” (Rivers 16). However, as it is sometimes described as “digital feminism, social media feminism, internet feminism, or hashtag feminism”, it is said to be established around 2008, when “Facebook, Twitter, and Youtube were firmly entrenched in the cultural fabric” (Cossman 44). Kira Cochrane officially announced the arrival of the Fourth Wave in a *Guardian* article in 2013, inquiring that technology was “allowing women to build a strong, popular, reactive movement online”. Campaigns like Laura Bates’s *Everyday Sexism* (with over 280,000 followers on Twitter) constitute a great example of the activist potential of social media, allowing women to share their experiences facing sexism and harassment in everyday life. Also, the election of Donald Trump in 2016 after his accusations of sexual misconduct (*The New York Times*) and controversial sexist comments (“Grab’em by the pussy. You can do

anything.”), in conjunction with Bill Cosby, Bill O’Reilly, and Roger Ailes’ scandals, increased the attention on institutionalized sexual violence and harassment that had already been addressed in the Second Wave of Feminism (Rhode 396-7). Nevertheless, it was the ignition of the #MeToo movement in October 2017 the cultural turning point that caused “an entirely legitimate frustration and anger” eruption (Cossman 51) which resulted in the consolidation of the Fourth Wave.

2.2 #MeToo Movement

#MeToo started trending on October 15 after U.S. actress Alyssa Milano tweeted “If you’ve been sexually harassed or assaulted write ‘me too’ as a reply to this tweet”, and within 24 hours, more than half a million people gave a response (Wexler et al. 92). Milano’s tweet was published in relation to movie mogul Harvey Weinstein’s allegations of a decades-long sexual scandal involving more than 80 different women, divulged by *The New York Times* and *The New Yorker* in the same month (Kantor and Twohey). According to Rhode (396) and Wiegman (2), the outrageousness of the crimes was enhanced by a “constellation of factors”, including “the pervasiveness of abuse and the strategies that enabled it”, as his unacceptable behaviour was an open secret in the Hollywood industry. For instance, actress Rose McGowan claims that when she told actor Ben Affleck about an incident with Weinstein, his response was, “God damn it, I told him to stop doing this”. Similarly, Quentin Tarantino, a “long-time collaborator of Weinstein’s” admitted “I knew enough to have done something about it” (Luo and Zhang 7; Kantor).

Milano’s initial aim was to “give people a sense of the magnitude of the problem” (Milano, 2017), that is “discursive activism”, with the goal of broadening the understanding of sexual harassment and assault and expanding the recognition of its victims (Boyle 3), a “mass reckoning with sexual harassment” (Cobb and Horeck 490). The movement “illustrated that

the work of second-wave feminists to make the personal political was far from complete” (Loney-Howes 29), as the scope of industries in which “patterns of wrongdoing” were found was unimaginable, evidencing the normalization of certain conducts of abuse in the workplace (Wexler et al. 92). In fact, Rhode claims that #MeToo is “the outgrowth of long-standing inadequacies in the way (...) legal institutions responded or failed to respond” (380). The movement is based on solidarity among women (Wiegman 10), who individually declare, and collectively validate the survivors’ experiences, “effectively challenging (...) the power structures” (Loney-Howes 29) and showing the harsh “daily reality in women’s lives” (Cossman 98). However, it is inevitable to highlight its relationship “with neoliberal and neoconservative principles” (Rivers 24) as, apart from social validation, it seeks access to justice and support for the victims and the legal accountability of the offenders.

As Deborah Rhode explains in her publication regarding a database by Termin and Company, in less than two years, more than 1,200 distinguished figures were publicly accused of “sexual harassment, assault, and other related workplace misconduct”, including Kevin Spacey, Jeffrey Tambor, Charlie Rose, or Matt Lauer, to name a few (395). As previously stated, it has become evident that the issue has transcended social media, as the rising awareness and the established social climate are being reflected in current audiovisual production. Films such as *She Said* or *Bombshell* depict real-life investigations into the allegations of sexual misconduct against Harvey Weinstein and Roger Ailes, respectively. While both films are of great importance in the ongoing conversation about the accountability of the perpetrators, the actions take place in different institutions of Hollywood and media, which may seem implausible and distant for some audiences. On the other hand, *The Assistant* offers a unique perspective through the eyes of a young employee who becomes aware of the potential abuse of power by her weinstein-esque boss. The figure of the abusive chief is also found in *Tár*, however, the fact that the abuser is a lesbian woman offers a different approach.

Films like *Promising Young Woman* or *Women Talking* deal with the process of navigating through trauma and healing after a sexual aggression (either a loved one's or their own). *Mon Crime*, on the other hand, addresses the subject from a comic perspective while still managing to deliver social commentary. Additionally, notable Netflix productions such as *Orange is the New Black*, *House of Cards*, *Jessica Jones*, and *13 Reasons Why* also tackle different handlings of victimhood. Therefore, it is possible to note that the increasing presence of #MeToo on screen is playing an essential role in the consolidation of the moment and the transmission of its core principles.

Nevertheless, it would be unethical to ignore all the controversy regarding #MeToo, as the phrase was originally coined by Tarana Burke in 2006 “to eradicate sexual abuse against black girls” (Olson 186) and, as Corrigan explains, the hashtag was “hijacked and whitewashed” by celebrities, who erased the existence of male victims, disregarded bidirectional violence, sexual violence against LGBTQ+ people and especially violence against “trans women of colour” (264). Typically, only “white, middle-class, heterosexual women who exhibit the hallmarks of good victimhood” have had access to platforms “to share their personal experiences in the public sphere” (Loney-Howes 30), while the problem with intersectionality had already been addressed in 1851, when Sojourner Truth questioned “ain’t I a woman too?” during a discussion of civil rights and women’s liberation (Rivers 10). On the other hand, campaigns such as #YesAllWomen, #BringBackOurGirls, and #SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen have helped to raise awareness against the excessive emphasis on “cisgender women’s experience of harassment and assault” (Cobb and Horeck 490).

Everything discussed above establishes the groundwork for the analysis of Aimee’s sexual assault storyline from the second season of *Sex Education* which will be undertaken in the following section, providing an exemplary portrayal of an educated response within the context of the #MeToo movement.

3. ANALYSIS

Aimee's empowerment quest is explored throughout *Sex Education*'s all three seasons, as the character is forced to undergo a painful process of self-recognition and maturity. In season one, her naiveté, insecurity and people-pleasing personality are made evident by her extreme display of sweetness and kindness, which result in her popular friends taking advantage of her. However, the beginning of her relationship with Steve (Chris Jenks), as well as her friendship with Maeve, help her start standing up for herself. Nevertheless, her sexual assault storyline from season two marks the deconstruction of her socially framed identity, creating an imposed, authentic, and subversive coming-of-age arc that runs parallel to her construction of a new identity as a survivor of sexual violence. By means of the use of social realism and a liberal feminist approach, the series conveys the long-term psychological impact of Aimee's traumatic experience, which will lead to her process of self-awareness as a multi-faceted, strong and empowered young woman who keeps developing in season three. The use of the storyline as a unit of analysis, rather than a scene or episode, helps in the understanding and framing of the issue (Aurah 53). Therefore, despite the importance of each of the seasons in Aimee's growth, the following sections will critically examine the most compelling scenes in relation to the depiction of sexual assault and trauma found in Aimee's storyline in the second season of *Sex Education*.

3.1 Perpetuation: "I got jizz on my jeans."

As Famurewa explains in her interview with the series creator Laurie Nunn, there is a clear dramatical and -as per its name- educational purpose in the show's graphic content. This is in line with *Sex Education*'s goal of attaining social realism through the application of social cognitive theory, portraying the existing consequences of certain styles of conduct (Aruah 52).

This section will discuss the focus on the depiction of the actual assault on Aimee and her initial reaction, as shown in the third episode.

A cheerful and positive track (Captain Sensible's "Happy Talk") acts as the opening for the storyline, conveying Aimee's naive and sweet personality, completely unaware of what is about to happen in her routine bus ride to school. As the bus is really crowded, she has to stand among many people, holding the pink bunny cake she has baked for Maeve's birthday. However, after some time, a close-up of her face reveals to the audience that there is something wrong with the man right behind her. The music suddenly fades and, by means of a point-of-view shot, it is shown that the man was actually masturbating on her. Even though Aimee manifests it out loud ("He's wanking on me!" S2:E3 03:35), nobody on the bus tries to help her. The change in the music, along with the unstable handheld camera close-ups, convey the distress and feeling of suffocation Aimee is experiencing inside the bus, which, from that moment, will constitute a triggering atmosphere for her. When she manages to get out of the vehicle, she realizes that the man has ejaculated on her jeans. According to Pina et al., any kind of sexual harassment is associated with the sexist ideology of male dominance (131). Therefore, as a modern audiovisual text, a spectatorship response is required, forcing them to consider their engagement in the power dynamics.



Figure 1: Aimee standing next to her abuser on the crowded bus.

While the rest of the passengers fail to validate the aggression, Maeve acts as the viewers' voice by condemning the offence and asserting, for the first time, that Aimee has been assaulted. However, when Maeve suggests reporting the incident to the police, Aimee downplays its relevance, justifying the man's actions ("I think he was just lonely, or not right in the head or something, which is weird 'cause he was quite handsome" S2:E3 11:18). As Stępień and Mhórdha (47) address, her early dismissal of what happened is an obvious consequence of the absence of discussion regarding sexual violence -both at home and in school-, as well as her "socially constructed femininity that defers to male sexuality", that has taught her not to "take up space", accommodating to everyone else's needs but hers (Aimee Lou Wood in *Still Watching Netflix* 11:45 - 12:12). It is also evidenced when, once Maeve convinces Aimee to go to the police station, she tells the police-officer that probably they were just wasting her time (S2:E3 16:16).

The use of humour, which is, according to Horeck ("Getting Back"), "central to the show's approach to sex education" can be considered "liberating" in a context that aims to take sexual assault seriously. In order to take the heat off the issue, a nervous Aimee compares the assault to someone sneezing on her, as "cum is kind of like a penis having a sneeze" (S2:E3 15:52). Also, the fact that Aimee seems more worried about her jeans ("Hope I get my jeans back [...] They're the perfect bootleg" S2:E3 24:21) than about the way she feels after the aggression provides a comedic tone to the situation. However, as it will be discussed later, Aimee's jeans convey the materialization of the assault and will play a relevant role in her process of healing. Maeve, on the other hand, is so calm and assured throughout the whole situation (Horeck, "Getting Back"). When the interrogation commences and Aimee is forced to recall the traumatic incident, Maeve questions the necessity of certain queries ([To the police officer] "Are you saying she shouldn't have smiled at him?" S2:E3 25:38). Furthermore, she convinces Aimee to proceed with the report in spite of the questions, invoking her empathy

and sorority (“What if he does this to someone else? I know you can do this” S2:E3 25:58). All of the above cement Maeve as the perfect, utopian depiction of the educated liberal feminist challenging contemporary sexism. Her approach to Aimee’s assault relying on justice and the importance of reporting as soon as possible contributes to the acknowledgement of the perpetration, which is, in fact, one of the key elements in theories of restorative justice (Wexler et al. 65). Despite the harshness of the police station sequence, it is designed to function as a model of performing for the audience, manifested by the social cognitive theory leading the show (Aruah 52).



Figure 2: Aimee joking about her borrowed pants in the interrogation room.

3.2 Trauma: “I don’t like you touching me anymore.”

Aimee’s initial response towards the sexual assault conveys realism, as she usually operates “in a plane of trust” (Aimee Lou Wood in *Still Watching Netflix* 08:20 – 8:59) and does not have the tools to cope with the abuse. Therefore, she tries to avoid the subject and get on with her day celebrating Maeve’s birthday. However, once she finds herself alone in her bedroom she starts processing what happened to her. The use of the storyline as a narrative device allows the depiction of the long-term impact that the assault had on Aimee, constructing a didactic reality for the audience. This section will analyse the repercussions of the sexual assault on

Aimee's behaviour as briefly shown in episodes 3, 4, 5, 6, and 7 of the second season of *Sex Education*.

At the end of the third episode, when Aimee comes back home, she refuses to tell her mother what happened on the bus despite their apparent close relationship. Then, a revealing 36-second steady-cam-shot long take (S2:E3 39:59 - 40:35) follows Aimee after closing her bedroom door, when she finds herself alone for the first time in the day and is able to actually reflect on the assault. Regardless of the presumed simplicity of the shot, it is of great importance to understand Aimee's individual process of trauma. The audience has a direct and explicit view of the victim's facial expression, invading her most intimate space where she is allowed to reveal her absolute vulnerability. When she starts crying, the camera zooms in slightly, with the purpose of bringing the spectator closer to her, forcing a sense of empathy. This scene can therefore be considered a turning point for Aimee, as it marks the beginning of her identity deconstruction as a survivor of sexual violence.



Figure 3: Aimee crying in her room, acknowledging the assault.

According to Benight and Bandura (1130), trauma recovery coping responses affect “intrapersonal, interpersonal, and occupational functioning”, depending on both “individual-level and situational factors” (Campbell et al. 231). As flawlessly depicted by the series, the posttraumatic reactions may include ruminative thoughts, anxiety increase, avoidant behaviour,

detachment from others, and disengagement from fulfilling aspects of life (Benight and Bandura 1130). In Aimee's case, one of the most evident psychological consequences of the assault is that she sees her abuser in different situations of her everyday life (again on the bus, S2:E4 5:58; at a party, S2:E6 35:57; and in her own high school, S2:E7 7:23), when, in fact, he is not actually there and it is just her anxious mind making it up as a self-defence mechanism.



Figures 4 and 5: Aimee's vision of his abuser on the bus and in her high school

She also rejects physical contact with her boyfriend Steve, as exemplified when she unconsciously slaps him while making out (S2:E5 24:50) or when she begs him to stop touching her ("Don't touch me, Steve. I don't think I like you touching me anymore" S2:E6 36:15). Although it can be considered as a minor or subtler adjustment, Aimee also slightly changes her way of dressing, as from episode 6 she starts wearing turtleneck jerseys and putting her hair up rather than wearing it down. Even though the assault occurred in episode 3, in the following two Aimee still wears her usual fashionable outfits, implying that the process of trauma is dynamic and changes over time. Nevertheless, the most explicit consequence is her avoidant behaviour towards taking the bus, which is the physical location where the assault took place. It constitutes the most triggering atmosphere for her, as from the first day after the assault, she had not been able to get back on (S2:E3 43:14; S2:E4 5:49). The assailant's wrongdoings have taken away Aimee's freedom to use public transport while feeling safe and secure, forcing her to change her routine. As Butler et al. state, by losing her means of movement, she is made "static", both physically and mentally, as "she cannot take her mind

off the event” (26). It is also relevant to note that, by switching public transport by lengthy walks, her feeling of isolation is undoubtedly enhanced, as can be perceived in the extreme long shots from episode 3 after not taking the bus for the first time (S2:E3 43:14). The different episodes facilitate reflecting the passage of time and the various transformations that Aimee, as a survivor of sexual violence, is compelled to undertake throughout her journey. Her character deconstruction is evident, mostly due to the manifestation of post-traumatic stress.



Figures 6 and 7: Extreme long shots conveying Aimee’s isolation.

3.3 Healing: “It’s just a stupid bus.”

In spite of Maeve’s initial support, it is possible to state that Aimee goes through the development of her trauma alone. However, rather than improving over time, she feels worse and worse psychologically, leading to a cathartic sequence where a sphere of support and sorority among women is established, materialising the core values of 2017’s #MeToo movement. While it cannot be considered that it completes her entire healing process, verbalising and validating her emotions, as well as finding actual encouragement, constitutes Aimee’s first step towards the self-recognition of her new identity as a survivor of sexual violence. This section will establish a connection between the cathartic culmination of Aimee’s second-season storyline -as shown in the seventh episode- and core sorority values rooted in the #MeToo movement.

As Horeck (“Getting Back”) asserts, the outset of the episode -a nod to the premise of John Hughes’ *The Breakfast Club*- can be understood as part of *Sex Education*’s “feminist

subversion of the casual misogyny of earlier iterations of the teen-comedy drama”. Aimee and five other girls (Maeve, Ola [Patricia Allison], Viv [Chinenye Ezeudu], Olivia [Simone Ashley], and Lily [Tanya Reynolds]) are accused of allegedly slut-shaming one of their teachers, who makes them prepare a presentation on what binds them together to enhance sorority among them (“One, or all of you, wanted to tear a fellow female down, now you can spend some time thinking about what you have in common instead” S2:E7 17:43). It may seem quite ironic, as all of them being of different “races, classes, sexualities, sizes, shapes, and backgrounds” (Horeck, “Better Worlds”) apparently have nothing in common. In fact, before long they start fighting and insulting each other ([Ola to Maeve] “You pretend to be all radical and feminist when you’re just a girl who goes around stabbing other girls in the back.” “You’re a snake.” S2:E7 29:30). This hostile atmosphere overwhelms Aimee, who, triggered and exhausted, starts stroking her jeans, serving as “an effective articulation of [her] embodied feelings” (Horeck, “Better Worlds”), bringing to the surface the memories of her trauma. As it can be perceived by the audience, the tactile significance of the jeans results in Aimee bursting into tears. While the argument continues out of the shot, the external focalization of the scene privileges Aimee, whose anxiety increases every second until she explodes shouting and crying, confessing her concerns about getting on the bus (“Aimee, why are you crying?” “Because I can’t get on the bus” S2:E7 30:03). From that exact moment, all the women put their differences aside in order to help Aimee.



Figures 8 and 9: Aimee strokes her jeans, remembering the assault.

Once Aimee is more serene, she acknowledges that it was not only the traumatising event itself that caused her distress, but the fact that she had lost faith in people. As she asserts, “[the assailant] had this really kind face (...) he didn’t look like a wanking psycho killer (...) if he could do something like that, then anyone could” (S2:E7 31:13). The character had always been defined by her sweetness and kindness, but this event has shifted her personality and she does not know how to navigate through life now, as she has experienced that such a simple gesture as smiling at a stranger could invite unwanted sexual behaviour. Additionally, she also admits that she used to feel so safe in the past, but not anymore (S2:E7 31:28). This could be related to the fact that nobody tried to help her on the bus, as everybody ignored the assault, normalising the situation. As a woman, she had been taught to accommodate everyone from a really young age, so rather than trying to find external help or a support network, she had been isolating herself (Aimee Lou Wood in *Still Watching Netflix* 11:45 - 12:12). Olivia is the first one (besides Maeve) to validate her emotions, confirming that the way she is feeling “doesn’t sound stupid” (S2:E7 31:33). The fact that it is Olivia conveys a clear sisterhood ideology, as she is one of Aimee’s former friends who used to bully her.

Through the character of Viv, *Sex Education* notes that, statistically, “two-thirds of girls experience unwanted sexual attention or contact in public spaces before the age of 21” (S2:E7 32:35). However, the series refrains from trapping its female characters within that statistic, empowering them to own their individual stories (Horeck, “Getting Back” and “Better Worlds”). By means of flashbacks (but with the use of present-day voiceover) each of the women in detention starts describing their experiences regarding sexual assault. They find a common link between all the narrations, that is that sexual assault has limited their movement in certain public spaces (the bus, the train station, Maeve’s trailer park, the swimming pool, the street, or even the internet). Thanks to their group reflection, the young women come to the conclusion that they are treated as “public property” (S2:E7 31:53), however, they also agree

on the fact that they should not change their behaviour because of men's past actions (S2:E7 32:05), which are usually based on a power imbalance ("Maybe it's a power thing" "I think the man on the bus liked that I was afraid" S2:E7 33:10). A safe sphere of compassion and tenderness is consolidated among the six women, who attentively listen to each other's stories without judging or questioning any of the details, nor the victim's response. It is relevant to highlight that not for a second do they doubt the version of their peers or consider that they have overreacted, on the contrary, from the first moment a connection of empathy is created ("I'm sorry that happened to you." "You too." S2:E7 33:33), which, according to Wexler et al., is of great importance in the process of healing (65). Despite finally not being guilty of slut-shaming their teacher, they concluded that "non-consensual penises" (S2:E7 35:27) were what bind them together. However, as Butler et al. acknowledge, this may be considered quite controversial, as it "perpetuates a dangerous narrative" about their relationship, mainly reduced to their "subjugated experience" with "misogynistic oppression" (26).



Figures 10 and 11: the young women leaving detention together.

The powerful shots of the women leaving the high school together convey strong political significance regarding resistance to patriarchal abuse, which gets reinforced by Aimee's statement: "I don't feel sad. I just feel angry" (S2:E7 35:37). This leads to the scene in which they smash abandoned cars in a landfill "as a form of group therapy" (Horeck, "Getting Back"), allowing them to express the anger caused by their traumatic experiences. The scene reaches its peak when Aimee shouts "I'm angry that a horrible man ruined my best jeans and nobody did anything, and now, I can't get on the fucking bus!" (S2:E7 40:48) while

destroying a window with a hammer. By means of a slow-motion montage sequence, all the women are depicted destroying the car, in what Butler et al. acknowledge as “a crescendo of feminist rage against the patriarchy” (26). This is also conveyed by the scene’s soundtrack, Cass Elliot’s “Make Your Own Kind of Music”, which aims to validate the distinctive and effective -as well as legitimate- way in which they decide to address their fury.



Figures 12 and 13: Aimee and the other women smashing the car.

Another significant image can be found in S2:E7 41:24, where a long shot depicts all the girls coming back home together, on an empty road at night. However, they are not scared, as they have a strong support network. It takes on greater significance when compared to a similar shot from the previous episode (S2:E6 45:02), in which Aimee returns home alone from a party after getting overwhelmed by her boyfriend Steve.



Figures 14 and 15: Contrast between episodes 6 and 7 regarding Aimee’s support.

The seventh episode’s final scene marks the emotional culmination of Aimee’s second-season storyline, providing an outstanding demonstration of collective female solidarity and resilience. The morning after the sorority session, Aimee seems to have found the strength to

get back on the bus. However, when she gets to the bus stop, she realizes that Maeve and the other women are also there to support her (“What are you doing here?” “We’re all getting the bus” S2:E7 46:52). This is consistent with the educational aim of the series, implying that all the characters are expected to advocate for the victim, not just Maeve because of their friendship. Even if Aimee hesitates for a short period of time, Maeve ends up convincing her to get on, expressing that “It’s just a stupid bus” (S2:E7 47:25), trying to make her safe and secure. One of the final shots depicts the young women sitting together filling the whole backseat of the bus, highlighting their differences and, at the same time, their unity. Echoing Horeck (“Getting Back” and “Better Worlds”), the power of such an image should not be underestimated, as it is essential to learn about “creative and resilient practices of young women as they push back against a culture that does not want them to take up space”. They are both physically and psychologically recovering the public space that was taken away from Aimee the moment the man on the bus decided to harass her. Even though Aimee is terrified (as evidenced by her facial expression), she will have a strong circle of women to provide aid when necessary through her journey, which conveys both the tangible and triggering bus ride, and the coming-of-age process she is already going through, which will allow her to become an educated, strong, and multi-faceted young woman. It can be considered that the extradiegetic soundtrack (Sharon Van Etten’s “Seventeen”) mirrors Aimee’s inner thoughts of nostalgia towards her previous self (“I used to be free. I used to be seventeen.”), but as the bus departs, a new process of self-awareness and recognition commences for her.



Figures 16 and 17: Aimee’s support network getting on the bus with her.

As depressing and disheartening as it may seem, *Sex Education* seems to imply that a woman's personal development appears to be linked to traumatic experiences arising from structural (and ostensibly unavoidable) patriarchal violence that operates as a catalyst for such growth. This, of course, perpetuates a problematic discourse about what a woman's identity is. Especially, if Aimee, the embodiment of the ideals of "class, femininity, sexuality, and race" represents "the patriarchal ideal of a woman that [should be] protected" as she is not considered threatening to society (Butler et al. 26). Furthermore, Aimee's healing is still not complete, as in season 3 of *Sex Education*, it is shown that she decides to start therapy in order to deal with the remaining long-term impact of the assault on her mental health ("Last term I was sexually assaulted and I thought that I was getting over it, but I don't think I am. 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." S3:E3 05:00). As Aruah also argues, it is yet unknown whether Aimee will "eventually find justice", as the fourth season of the series has not aired yet (60). Nevertheless, Aimee's storyline undoubtedly constitutes a brilliant portrait of the long-time consequences of sexual assault in teenagers and her circle's response should be taken as a model of conduct in such situations, reinforcing the educational and pedagogical purpose of the series.

4. CONCLUSION

After analysing the didactic potential of Aimee's sexual assault storyline in *Sex Education* within a post #MeToo context, it can be concluded that the series provides a laudable example of a liberal feminist response towards misogyny and sexual misconduct, validating the figure of the victim/survivor and acknowledging the non-linear process of trauma.

The first section of this dissertation has dealt with the textual depiction of the assault on the bus and Aimee's initial reaction, failing to recognise the aggression as such. By exploring the overtones of setting an innocent and uneducated young woman as the victim of abuse, the series highlights the importance of the ongoing conversation regarding the denunciation of structural sexual misconduct. By insisting that Aimee fills out a police report, Maeve embodies the ideals of educated liberal feminism, turning her into a role model for the audience.

The second section examined the approach to Aimee's post-traumatic stress, a non-linear process of avoidance, isolation, and anxiety. It is also emphasised how the storyline device helps in portraying the long-time impact of the assault, which, in the end, forces her to abandon -what she considered to be- her identity. This could bring a sense of liberation for other survivors of sexual violence, as they encounter a validating reflection of their own experiences in Aimee's process.

The last section explored the cathartic closure of Aimee's storyline in season two, which involves the creation of a network of support and understanding, a celebration of feminist rage against the patriarchy and, finally, the beginning of her restoration journey. The episode undoubtedly constitutes one of the most outstanding examples of sorority found in contemporary audiovisual production, focusing on the significance of actively listening to other women's stories and aiding each other despite existing social and cultural differences. Whilst taking into account the controversy regarding the ideal model of victimhood portrayed by

Aimee, both her and her social environment constitute a strong and effective articulation of the main features of the #MeToo movement, as well as an exemplary educational tool for younger generations who will hopefully not tolerate any kind of sexual abuse.

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