

# Exploring Shiksa Goddess in *The Big Bang Theory* Sitcom: Bernadette Rostentkowski-Wolowitz and Howard Wolowitz Case

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## *Abstract*

*Recently, there has been growing interest in the popularity of sitcoms, some of them becoming iconic, e.g. The Big Bang Theory that aired its final successful 12th season on CBS in the United States in 2019. The cultural phenomenon and significance of the sitcom has been explained and discussed, e.g. in the Concise Dictionary of Popular Culture (2017). However, the main aim of my research paper is to present the complex cultural concept of shiksa or shiksa goddess referred to in my paper as 'the other' through the examination of Howard's relationship with Bernadette and show to what extent the stereotype still creates hostile prejudice. I will examine and outline certain characteristics of the mythical status of shiksa in American popular culture and try to explain the historical roots of the gentile woman who 'has long been a magnet for intense feelings, from male yearning to communal hatred' as evidenced by Benvenuto (2004:5).*

*Keywords: sitcom, shiksa, shiksa goddess, the other*

## **Introduction**

*The Big Bang Theory* is an American sitcom created by Chuck Lorre and Bill Prady, and directed by Mark Cendrowski. It is a show about physicists Sheldon Cooper and Leonard Hofstadter as well as engineer Howard Wolowitz and astrophysicist Raj Koothrappali whose nerdy, geeky and introverted lives are changed when women become part of their circle.

Once Howard, who is Jewish American, falls in love with 'the other', we learn about Bernadette Rostenkowski, a Polish American and mythical *shiksa* woman. The image of the *shiksa*, a promiscuous and intelligent woman, who attracts Howard's attention is not only featured in numerous Jewish American novels but is a commonly utilized trope in contemporary sitcoms. This research paper investigates the stereotypical *shiksa* and the complexity of Howard and Bernadette's interfaith relationship that leads to their marriage.

Understanding the complexity of the stereotype, namely a gentile *shiksa* and a Jewish man still fulfils a negative cultural stereotype of one's group (Steele 1997). Such stereotypes, which are fixed general images or various sets of characteristics representing a particular group of people, are likely to affect our perception of the world around us. Unfortunately, stereotypes are frequently used and exploited in American film industry.

## **Concept of *shiksa* and *shiksa goddess***

What we know about the term *shiksa* is that it refers to a gentile woman who might be a temptation to Jewish men. According to Friedman (2008) this term deriving from something 'unclean and dirty' has been applied to gentiles who do other things 'inimical to Jewish interests' – such as dating and marrying Jewish men. Also, the Dictionary of Jewish Words (2006) informs us that the word is a distortion of the Hebrew root 'sheketz', which refers to

the flash of a taboo animal in the Torah. Cohen (1999) points out that the concept of *shiksa* can be traced back to the simple rule of matrilineality, the system by which lineage (i.e. Jewishness) is traced through the mother. It has to be stressed that many Jewish men will not marry outside the Jewish faith because Jewish law commands and states that their children would no longer retain their ethnic identity – that is, they might no longer be considered Jewish.

According to the Torah and other Jewish religious teachings, this doctrine of matrilineal descent has been part of Judaism since at least the second century C.E. (common era), when it was codified into the Talmud, the body of religious writings that supplement the Jewish holy book of the Torah. The Talmud expands on the Torah passages of Deuteronomy 7, which oppose intermarriage by Jews. This verse states that the child of a Jewish woman and a non-Jewish man will be Jewish. Other Torah verses admonish Jewish men from taking non-Jewish wives because their children will not be Jewish.

(Cohen 1999: 261)

This seemingly simple Jewish law poses some problems i.e., a division between Jewish and non-Jewish *shiksa* women. This can be compared in Jewish manner as a little like ‘kosher’, namely a proper thing, and ‘treif’, which can be seen as not appropriate or right. Similar to the idea of the forbidden fruit in the garden of Eden, the *shiksa* appears to remain somewhat tempting and alluring to Jewish men. Moreover, the concept of *shiksa* as a woman who is foreign, forbidden and strange is featured in several books of the Torah, which provide exemplary or cautionary tales of Jewish men and heroes who struggle or surrender to the temptations of non-Jewish women such as the character of Lilith in the Talmud. Patai (1990) explains that Lilith becomes not only ‘a spirit of darkness’, but also a figure of uncontrolled sexuality. As Patai (1990: 224) further explains in the Babylonian Talmud (Shabbat151a): “It is forbidden for a man to sleep alone in a house, lest Lilith get hold of him.” This law is arguably complicated in that it restricts a specific action by a Jewish man and so the interpretation and application of the law is also complicated.

Christine Benevenuto in her book *Shiksa: the Gentile Woman in the Jewish World* (2004: 54) explains that “Jewish tradition is replete with images of gentile women. From the archetypal stories inscribed on the parchment scrolls of the Torah to the Jewish press of early America, to contemporary novels and films, to timeless – and timeworn – Jewish jokes, the gentile woman is a constant presence in the narrative of the Jewish people.” In the same vein, Lauren Cardon in her book, *The “White Other” in American Intermarriage Stories, 1946-2008*, points out that *shiksa* possess one role, that of the role of sexual seductress. She is often the femme fatale, who easily tempts the bewildered Jewish males away from their own best interests, destroys their family line, and makes the Jewish people weaker by costing it so many of its weak and seduced men.

Traditionally, *Shiksa* has a very defined and limited role in Jewish culture. She is often portrayed as a seductive lover and gentile temptress. *Shiksa goddesses* is seen as an exotic female in Jewish life. She is the sexy *shiksa*, frequently “a blue-eyed blonde who offers gratifications withheld, at least until marriage, by proper Jewish girls” (Jaher 1983: 522).

Furthermore, Jaher (1983: 520) argues that studies in the social and psychological dynamics of interfaith courtship suggest that Jewish men and Christian, mostly Catholic men are every so often drawn together since they have these stereotyped views or fantasies about their romantic partners from the other faith. These images are prominently featured in Jewish-

American novels concerned with the *shiksas* and their Jewish lovers. In the 20th century, in American Jewish literature, *shiksa* is present in the works of Isaac Bashevis Singer, Bernard Malamud, Saul Bellow, Phillip Roth, among others. It has to be noted that these outstanding novelists frequently use the image of *shiksa* and *shiksa goddess* to the point that this has seemingly become part of mainstream American culture. However, as rightly argued by Cardon (2012: 75) “*shiksa* relationship focus less on Jewish ancestry and more on contemporary Jewish identity – especially negotiations of masculinity within Jewish and American culture.” This can be explained by the fact that since, roughly, the 1950s, when the second generation of mostly East European Jews had matured and started their professional life, their commitment to religion almost vanished. Their drive to become assimilated meant the loss of the substantive components of their religion, the practices and the laws. Judaism was replaced by the concept of ‘Jewishness’ i.e., Jewish identity.

‘In Strangers to the Tribe: Portraits of Interfaith Marriage’ Glaser (1997) presents the present-day reality of intermarriage, with all its challenges and problems. Glaser (1997) points out that the clearly visible absence of religiousness among many of those who opt to marry outside their religion appears to be a common notion. Both Jews and Christians are simply strangers to their own church. It has to be mentioned that while some of the American Jews still identify themselves with Judaism, they don’t have strong religious beliefs, “it’s more being a member of a tribe than even being a member of a religion” Glaser (1997:150).

Interfaith marriage is popular among Jewish Americans. The survey ‘A Portrait of Jewish Americans’ conducted by Pew Research Center in 2013 shows that 44% of all currently married Jewish respondents and 58% who married since 2005 indicated they were married a non-Jewish spouse.

### **Characterisation of Bernadette Rostenkowski-Wolowitz**

Bernadette Rostenkowski-Wolowitz is a microbiologist who has a high-paying job at a pharmaceutical company, Zangen. She is married to Howard Wolowitz, with whom she has two children, Halley and Neil Michael.

#### *Background and Family*

Bernadette is from Yorba-Linda, California and is of Polish heritage, although she does not speak Polish and rarely observes any traditions. What we know is that Bernadette’s large Catholic family consists of five siblings, sisters and brothers. Having such a big stereotypically Catholic family means that Bernadette has to take care of her younger sisters and brothers, which we can assume is one of the reasons she is not very fond of having her own children.

In the sitcom, Bernadette’s father, so-called stereotypically orthodox Mike Rostenkowski, is a retired police officer who holds many right-wing views. We learn that when Howard first meets Mike, Bernadette warns Howard to avoid the following subjects such as references to Howard’s Jewish heritage, the democratic president Jimmy Carter, gardeners, recycling, foreigners, LGBT+ community, Sean Penn, Vatican II, and gun control. Thus, the right-leaning tendencies of Bernadette’s father help us understand her character better.

### *Appearance and Personality*

Bernadette, a blue-eyed blonde, “the little Polish girl” as Howard’s mom Debbie calls her, is a prime example of the *shiksa*, who is often referred to as the sexy, temptress *shiksa goddess* among Jews. She wears skirts and cardigans, which make her look feminine and tempting for Howard. Although Bernadette is generally nice, kind and good-natured, she also shows a dark side and admits that she might be a very resentful and vengeful person. For example, the very character of *shiksa* can be illustrated when Bernadette suggested to Penny that they spy on Amy’s date with Dave, Penny notes that Bernadette is mean and sneaky. Bernadette, as a typical *shiksa*, agrees with the remark saying “Yeah, but I’m little, so it’s adorable.” Furthermore, Howard and the other sitcom’s characters have also noticed that when Bernadette is angry and irritated, she sounds a lot like Howard’s late mother, Debbie Wolowitz. She is also independent and has no fear of expressing her opinions.

### *Relationship with Howard*

Howard was introduced to Bernadette by Penny, who was a waitress with her at the Cheesecake Factory, in the fifth episode of the third season titled “The Creepy Candy Coating Corollary”. Interestingly, both Howard and Bernadette quickly bond over their bossy and overbearing mothers. Once Howard understands this might become a long-lasting relationship, he hurriedly proposes to Bernadette. Although, at first, she, as an archetypical *shiksa* who plays on a Jewish man’s psyche, does not accept his proposal but they continue dating. Still, towards the end of Season 3, Bernadette abruptly breaks things off with Howard as she catches him having cybersex with ‘Glacinda the Troll’ on World of Warcraft. Despite all the cultural differences, Howard is drawn to ‘the other’ *shiksa goddess* Bernadette, they get back together early in Season 4 with Bernadette, an independent woman, wishing to move things forward unhurriedly. Finally, Howard, still fantasising about this gentile woman, proposes to Bernadette near the end of Season 4 and she cautiously accepts.

What Jaher (1983) stresses is that their relationship is plentiful in tensions and conflicts which are characteristic of ‘interfaith courtship’. For example, once Wil Wheaton uploads a video from Howard’s bachelor party of Raj drunkenly describing some of Howard’s sexual conquests, immediately Bernadette questions their impending wedding. What’s more, after gaining her PhD in microbiology, Bernadette is head-hunted by a big pharmaceutical company and offered a well-paying job, meaning she raises her status and power over her then boyfriend. What functions as another seductive factor is Bernadette’s higher earning potential than Howard’s, a fact that occasionally causes a rift in their relationship, but also makes *shiksa* more sexually attractive.

It has to be pointed out that tensions and fights are typical in a relationship with a *shiksa goddess*. Howard’s wish to start a family creates pressure on Bernadette who does not like children and considers career as the most important thing. Yet, Bernadette supports her husband Howard while he works in space and, upon his return home, the *goddess* helps him adjust back to the life on Earth.

As a metaphorical *shiksa*, she has never been accepted by Bernard’s Jewish mother. The resentment is mutual. After all, Howard’s mom sees every *shiksa* as a threat to the Jewish existence, a typical young Jewish man falling in love with a *shiksa goddess* regardless of his parents’ consent. Similarly, Bernadette is not fond of living at Debbie Wolowitz’s house once they get married. Yet Bernadette can be a decent *shiksa* as well. She is deeply

moved once she learns that Howard is helping his mother in sickness when he suddenly abandons Bernadette.

Howard and Bernadette eventually discuss the issue of having children together, and Bernadette agrees to think about having kids when Howard decides that he will not leave all the hard work to her. Howard assures her he wants to be the type of father who is always helpful and around, since his father has walked out on his family. Moreover, he wants to prove to Bernadette that he can be 'manly' as he always struggles with that complex. Interestingly, the children's religion, which always raises problems in the interfaith marriages, has never been discussed. In the end, as Jaher (1983:528) explains "Jewish and Catholic newcomers and their children found common ground in their uneasy sense of being considered marginal, and frequently despised."

Howard is a prime example of the man showing Oedipal impulses which drive Jewish men into the arms of Christian women. He has a complicated relationship with his mother that leads him to the deep connection he feels with Bernadette. As observed by Cardon (2012: 76) *shiksa* "also serves to reveal the Jewish protagonist's neurotic and often patronizing behaviour." Interestingly, Howard seems to represent both neurotic and narcissistic personality traits. He needs to be constantly in the centre of attention, wears extremely colourful outfits and loves being the focal point of his mother and Bernadette's world. On the other hand, Bernadette wants a partner she can feel secure with. However, we may get the impression that regardless of Bernadette's own successes Howard and his Jewish community still perceive as a stereotypical *shiksa*, a gentile woman, an ideal partner and attractive seducer.

## Conclusions

This research paper set out to explore the stereotype of *shiksa* through the example of Bernadette Rostenkowski presented in the Big Bang Theory sitcom. It has to be stated that stereotypes in the American film industry reflect and shape common prejudices.

Following Lippmann's (1922) definition of stereotype that defines the concept as a readily available image of a given social group, typically based on rough, frequently negative generalizations, we might claim that the sitcom's characters enhance the stereotypical image of 'others' and 'outsiders' and the multifaceted relations between an American Jew and American Pole - a Jew and gentile woman *shiksa* - with their ethnic background and heritage.

In this context fictional depictions of Jewish male-Christian female liaisons become microcosmic representations of momentous issues of group and self-survival and betrayal, of balancing anxieties and ambitions, of the reconciling religious and national loyalties, and of bridging the past and present. Jaher (1983:528) explains "Jewish and Catholic newcomers and their children found common ground in their uneasy sense of being considered marginal, and frequently despised."

Further research is needed to better understand the nature of *shiksa* gender roles, the sexual battles she is frequently implicated in as well as numerous nonsexual aspects of interfaith relationship.

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*In SKASE Journal of Literary and Cultural Studies [online]. 2020, vol. 2, no. 1 [cit. 2020-06-24]. Available on web page [http://www.skase.sk/Volumes/SJLCS03/pdf\\_doc/04.pdf](http://www.skase.sk/Volumes/SJLCS03/pdf_doc/04.pdf). ISSN 2644-5506.*