
Sexual Duty and Commodification of Women in Patriarchal Marriage: A Feminist Reading of *Clothes* and *The Intrusion*

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Abstract: This paper explores the intersection of sexual duty and the commodification of women within phallic society, through a critical feminist reading of *Clothes* by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni and *The Intrusion* by Shashi Deshpande. Contemporary research on these stories often emphasizes themes like cultural transition and gendered violence, perhaps overlooking the critical gap for exploring how female sexuality is limited to the fulfillment of male sexual desire and is categorically owned by the husband—something normalized and internalized. The main objective of this paper is to analyze the normalized commodification of women's bodies through Simone de Beauvoir's thoughts on sexual submission as an act of exchange and Luce Irigaray's theory of women as commodities and exchangeable objects. The study argues that protagonists of both stories are hegemonically manipulated by patriarchal society into believing that husbands have control over their wives' bodies, neglecting the need for consent and resulting in the death of autonomy and agency. This paper critiques the dogmatic framework constructed by patriarchal society that first "chooses" women as suitable wives and then constrains them to sexual acts disguised as natural "duties" within marriage. Rather than focusing solely on gendered violence and cultural coercion, this paper offers a feminist lens into normalized sexual submission and commodification.

Keywords: Patriarchy, Duty, Commodity, Woman

Introduction: Marriage is a socially accepted relationship between a man and a woman. Through this institution, men have constituted a rigid sense of control over female sexuality and their bodies. As Kumari Jayawardena in *Feminism and Nationalism in the Third World* emphasizes, South Asian traditions define a wife's role as service, sacrifice, and submission to be considered a "good wife." Indian English writing, especially women's writing, has long engaged with this theme. However, the area demanding interrogation—commodification and internalized normalcy of sexual intimacy as duty—remains less explored. This paper

analyzes two short stories: *Clothes* by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni and *The Intrusion* by Shashi Deshpande, through the lens of feminist theory to confront commodification and normalized sexual submission as wifely duty.

The protagonists of both stories are “selected” as brides in a manner similar to objects examined in a marketplace. This form of selection is often celebrated as tradition but ignores the individual agency, desires, and self-worth of women, reducing them to objects evaluated for virtue, beauty, behavior, and service. Such commodification is not symbolic but institutional—it makes a woman appear as property, subsuming her sexuality in the guise of service. Both *Clothes* and *The Intrusion* depict marital intimacy not as explicit violence but as silent realities where intimacy lacks emotional connection and consent.

In *Clothes*, the protagonist is initially chosen as a bride and, on her wedding night, manipulated into fulfilling her role by offering sexual service to her husband to retain the title of a “good wife.” Similarly, in *The Intrusion*, the protagonist is chosen based on family expectations and expresses discomfort during intimacy, internalizing guilt for feeling this way.

Through Simone de Beauvoir’s critique in *The Second Sex*—where sexual intimacy is described as a “service” women provide—and Luce Irigaray’s theory of “use value and exchange value” in *The Sex Which Is Not One*, this paper highlights how women are commodified and treated as objects of exchange in a patriarchal, phallic society. The protagonists’ internalized guilt and silence reflect the normalization of submission. These stories do not center rebellion but critique a society that denies women the right to say no. By examining commodification and sexual duty, this paper moves beyond interpretations that view *Clothes* as cultural transition and *The Intrusion* as trauma. Instead, it presents them as feminist critiques of a society that controls women’s bodies under the guise of marital duty.

Literature Review: *Clothes* has been critically explored in terms of cultural identity, migration, and shifting selfhood. In *Cultural Transformation of an Immigrant Indian Woman in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s Clothes*, Dr. S. Ayyappa Raja emphasizes how the protagonist transforms through clothing as a symbol of adapting to new roles. However, he overlooks how her passive sexual compliance is shaped by normalized gendered expectations.

In *Exploring Marriage Dynamics and Gender-Based Violence: A Critical Analysis of Shashi Deshpande’s Intrusion*, Manbir Singh and Shivani Vashist highlight sexual abuse and gender roles, focusing on emotional discomfort. Yet, they rarely interrogate the commodification and internalized sexual guilt experienced by the protagonist.

Both stories are often read for emotional or cultural experiences while the physical and sexual dimensions remain underexplored. The commodification involved in bride

selection is rarely examined as a feminist critique. This paper fills that gap by exploring how patriarchy naturalizes sexual duty and objectifies women within marriage.

Research Gap: Although *Clothes* and *The Intrusion* have received critical attention, the specific interrogation of sexual duty and commodification within marriage is absent. Bride selection is often analyzed for cultural tradition but not through the lens of commodification. The paper draws on de Beauvoir and Irigaray to show how patriarchy reduces women to objects selected and confined to sexual service without regard for their desire. This framework uncovers expectations operating beneath the surface of newly married life in both narratives.

Methodology: This paper adopts close textual analysis grounded in feminist literary theory. The primary method involves close reading of *Clothes* and *The Intrusion* with attention to narrative structures that normalize sexual duty in patriarchal marriages. The analysis is based on Simone de Beauvoir's idea of sexual service and Luce Irigaray's theory of women as exchange value. These feminist theories provide a dual framework to understand how marriage regulates a woman's body through commodification and obligation.

Discourse:

Clothes by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni: A Silent Narrative of Sexual Duty and Commodification: In *Clothes*, Banerjee presents a young protagonist transitioning into marriage and migration. The story begins with a "bride-viewing" ritual. The line from her aunt, "if I'm lucky enough to be chosen," reflects her internalized objectification. Her fate depends on meeting imposed standards—aligning with Irigaray's claim that women are use-value and exchange-value in a phallic society.

After marriage, her husband initiates sex. She notes, "Now his fingers were stroking my cheeks, my throat, moving downward. I closed my eyes and tried not to jerk away because after all it was my wifely duties" (Divakaruni). This reflects de Beauvoir's view that women render sexual service while men receive pleasure. Passion is absent; only obligation remains.

Her friend Madhavi warns her: "It helps if you can think about something else," a generational preparation for suppressing desire. The protagonist cries out in pain and feels ashamed: "I cried out. I couldn't help it although I was ashamed." This shows how moral shame is assigned to any visible discomfort. The silence in *Clothes* is a powerful symbol of internalized sexual service and commodification.

The Intrusion by Shashi Deshpande: A Guilt of Resistance: In *The Intrusion*, the protagonist is introduced through her family's decision. Her mother says, "They had agreed to our proposal. No one had asked me if I had agreed; it had been taken for granted" (Deshpande 47). This reflects a patriarchal norm where a woman's consent is not considered.

The husband's family seeks someone “simple and sophisticated”—an adaptable object. She is shaped and chosen based on male standards.

On her honeymoon, her husband “was forcing his body on mine” (Deshpande 52). She reflects, “It was over, my body having helped him by some strange instinct beyond and outside me” (Deshpande 53), echoing de Beauvoir’s view that men deny women the autonomy of pleasure. She blames herself: “I felt as if I had committed a crime,” though she also feels a sense of escape.

This guilt, not resistance, defines her experience. She imagines returning “shamed and rejected,” showing how failing to provide sexual pleasure equates to social abandonment. *The Intrusion* captures the patriarchal conditioning where discomfort is equated with failure.

Conclusion: *Clothes* and *The Intrusion* reveal how patriarchal norms shape sexual intimacy through duty, silence, and shame. Women are first chosen like commodities and later expected to surrender to marital expectations. Their discomfort is not validated but transformed into internal guilt.

Using de Beauvoir's idea of sexual service and Irigaray’s concept of woman as commodity, this paper critiques how female sexuality is framed as obligation, not individuality. These narratives offer feminist insight into how marriage controls women’s bodies through normalized expectations.

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