

Patriarchy and representation of bdsm culture: 'fifty shades of grey' and critica...



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The popularity of the Fifty Shades trilogy has positioned it under analysis on whether it fosters the feminist discourse and BDSM culture, or not. In E. L. James' *Fifty Shades of Grey*, the developing relationship between Ana Steele, a university graduate, and Grey a business mogul is explored in the realm of BDSM. Ana is depicted as a juvenile and timid female who is sexually awoken to the sexual universe of dominance and submission by the sexually experienced Grey (James). Though sexually prude, Ana dives impetuously into the dominance relationship, gradually uncovering Christian sexual tendencies that push the limits of pleasure and pain. The subsequent books also progressively explore the complexity of the relationship while exposing the motivations and the pasts of the characters, especially Grey. The book is inclined towards exploring the sexual identities of both genders paving way for postfeminist themes and discourse of equality between the sexes. However, deep analysis showcase inclination towards conservative constructs and stigmatization of the BDSM culture sparking discourses on feminism, patriarchal ideologies, and rape culture. I will demonstrate analysis of scholarly articles that emphasize that despite being admired as empowering women and representing the BDSM culture, *Fifty Shades of Grey* in actuality restates the patriarchal and traditional concepts while misrepresenting the BDSM communities.

Sara Upstone's *Beyond the Bedroom* asserts that *Fifty Shades'* representation of women's roles alters the writing from a potentially progressive feminist discourse into an extension of conservative constructs. Upstone highlights motherhood as a central theme in the novels in regards to how the construct is used to portray female identities. " The novels

presents...an ideal mother positioned as self- sacrificing and loving unconditionally, and a failed mother who is associated with neglect and selfishness” (Upstone 140). She argues that the novels are inclined to view every female character in the terms of motherhood, which offers for a contradictory discourse in terms of its claim on ambivalence and openness. Upstone illustrates how motherhood is represented as an ideology that requires sacrificing self-identity and renouncing one’s womanhood or female sexuality. “ Ana...must give herself up both physically and psychologically for Christian, the son, replicating only the limiting ideologies of motherhood...” (Upstone 148). She claims Ana is also portrayed as a replacement for Christian’s birth mother catering to his ‘ Oedipal impulses’. Upstone further argues that despite the texts pushing for feminist discourse through Ana eventual independent choices, its ideology of motherhood negates this effort. “ It is motherhood that returns Ana from a place of ambivalent female fantasy...to an absolute patriarchal discourse” (Upstone 158). She concludes that the real violence in the texts occurs beyond the bedroom where female identities are yet viewed under the conservative social role of motherhood.

In *Fifty Shades of Consent?* Francesca Tripodi argues that the *Fifty Shades* books stigmatize the BDSM culture by failing to explore the subjects of clear consent, and a woman’s authority in a sexual relationship, which are basics in the BDSM community. Tripodi emphasizes that this is a problem because “...readers are using *Fifty Shades* as a way of guiding them through the post-feminist milieu...” (Tripodi 94). She argues because women use them to steer through sexual relationships and misogyny in this patriarchal culture, *Fifty Shades* falls short at depicting the construct of confirmatory consent in

the BDSM culture. She states "...her novel also fails to educate " vanilla" readers on the most important aspect...affirmative consent" (Tripodi 104). Tripodi claims that BDSM respondents attribute the wrong representation to plot points such as "...the connection between Christian's being abused by his mother as a child and his involvement with BDSM" (Tripodi 101). She further argues that the book series actually does a disservice to the female audience attempting to articulate their sexual yearnings and expressing their sexual perimeters. She encompasses her argument by asserting that the misrepresentation of BDSM only contributes to further stigmatization of the culture as ' not normal'. Tripodi concludes that other than stigmatizing the culture, it furthers the misconception that silence translates to yes in agreeing to engage in sexual activities.

In my argument, *Fifty Shades of Grey* does a disservice to the feminist discourse by reiterating conservative and patriarchal constructs, contrary to claim that it furthers the discourse. The book shows its conservativeness through its depiction of disparity in sexuality between the genders: that respectable women are sexually innocent while men are portrayed as decent irrespective of their sexual experience. In the novel, Ana asserts " I'm just too naïve and inexperienced" (James 152). Furthermore, the man, Christian, is depicted as powerful, rich and controlling and irresistible to the woman, Ana, who timid, innocent, and naive. Upstone's *Beyond the Bedroom* makes potent arguments regarding the prominent patriarchy in *Fifty Shades*. She claims Ana's sexuality is held in the limits of male patriarch and Christian, extending past the role-playing and the bedroom (Upstone 147). The erotic romance book has been attributed to contributing to the feminist discourse

on sexual liberation however the underlying themes betray the effort. On the issue, Upstone argues that the text attempts to empower and liberate women sexually but ends up reasserting the same traditional female role of motherhood it tries to outstrip (Upstone 139). In general, the arguments embrace the attitude that the novel fosters conservative ideologies it tries to avert, furthermore it also fails at the effort to factually portray the BDSM culture.

Tripodi's *Fifty Shades of Consent* asserts strong arguments that support the stance that *Fifty Shades* trilogy fails at representing the BDSM culture and further stigmatizes the sexual practices. In the book, Ana seeks to embrace Christian sexual kinks but in the long run wishes for a 'normal' relationship. She states "...wishing he was - normal - wanting a normal relationship that doesn't need a...a flogger, and karabiners in his playroom ceiling" (James 136). In my analysis and interpretation, the author seeks to shed light on the subculture but gradually ends up stigmatizing it. Tripodi's article offers arguments that further a similar interpretation. Her research claim that submissives from the BDSM communities did not identify with the character which proves the book's misinterpretation of the culture (Tripodi 98). She also claims that the readers naively use the fiction as an instructive resource to understand the subculture hence being inconvenient to the audience (Tripodi 94). Similarly to Tripodi's arguments, my interpretation seeks to argue that in its attempt to focus on a BDSM-based relationship, *Fifty Shades of Grey* fails at accurately depicting the constructs of the subculture. However, there are few distinctions between Tripodi's arguments with my interpretation of the *Fifty Shades* text.

The underlying constructs in *Fifty Shades of Grey* restate the patriarchal and traditional ideologies that the text has been attributed to elude while offering a fallacious representation of the BDSM culture. Arguments from Upstone's *Beyond the Bedroom* and Tripodi's *Fifty Shades of Consent* offer support for the thesis and also give further insight into other issues regarding the text. Upstone's opinions support the ideology by arguing that the book fosters an outdated construct of motherhood in the female characters, as a result, undermining feminist inclinations. These arguments offer substantial support to the claim that *Fifty Shades of Grey* fosters conservative ideologies with patriarchal proclivities that undermine the furtherance of a feminist discourse. Tripodi asserts that the misinterpretation of the BDSM culture in the book has a negative effect on the image of the subculture. Subsequently, the readers engross the depiction of the subculture and its constructs as factual hence negatively impacting their sexual relationships. The perception that the novel can act as a source of reference into the concepts of a BDSM culture is a damaging one. Additionally, Tripodi offers a nuanced argument on the current sexual dynamic and affirmative consent highlighting further insight on the influences of popular fictions. This offers a platform for further analysis of the text and interpretations of the underlying ideas.

Works Cited

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