

Fashion, Lifestyle, and Sexuality: *Fifty Shades of Grey* as an extensive anti-feminist text

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Fifty Shades of Grey published in 2011 has seen an epoch making success with two sequels of equal to less achievement published, and the first book already becoming a blockbuster movie. Written by British novelist Erika Mitchell alias E. L. James and movie version directed by Sam Taylor-Johnson, *Fifty Shades of Grey* is still a debatable topic because of its influence in popular culture. Even amidst bans and censorships, both the print version and the movie became popular, reaching to millions. The work in concern can be effortlessly criticized for propagating and naturalizing BDSM (Bondage and Discipline, Dominance and Submission, Sadism and Masochism) culture, but a larger apprehension is about the portrayal of women. Even though the author is a woman, majority of positive reviewers are women, and the author herself projects the book as a celebration of sexual freedom for women, the extent to which women are demeaned in the very traditional way should be analyzed. This will bring into light the fact that the book is not at all a manifesto of sexual expression for women but a script filled with evidences to show that the author herself is not free from patriarchal influence. The stereotypical representations of women as attracted to lavishness, riches, and strength is reinforced in the novel.

Narrated from the point of view of the female protagonist Anastasia Steele, the text shows the lifestyle of an inexorably rich young man Christian Grey who is addicted to BDSM culture, and the female protagonist's relationship with him. The text as well as the movie successfully portrays the psychological anguish of both the characters, Christian being incapable of letting his lifestyle go or shake of his confused feelings for Anastasia, and Anastasia being incapable of letting Christian go because she develops feelings for the 'rich' Christian despite the disrespectful sexual encounters she experiences with him who showers her with lavishness. The text is already glorified at several instances as a manifesto of free sexual expression and forerunner of an era of explicit writing that shuns all hypocrisy. Since the author is a woman and the narrative's vantage point is of a woman's, the popularity among the women readers is immense. The book has become a celebrated success, soothing the consciousness of millions of people, convincing them of the grandeur of the text by erasing the numbness and shyness when it comes to matters of explicit sexuality, which can easily be labeled as a perversion in several cultures.

However, a deeper analysis of the text will reveal the exact opposite facet of the text. It is not a text that favors female sexual freedom but an overt manifesto of patriarchal dominative theory that manipulates female consciousness to convince them of their subjugated position. *Fifty Shades of Grey* is using a technique in which confused feelings are generated about the text, primary reading suggesting that it is against women in general but hinting that there is something that is deeper than

the surface meaning that might be pro-feminist, this itself is the success of the text. On analysis, the text can be manipulated as a discourse supportive for freedom of expression and explicit female sexuality. The submissive attitude of the heroine can be twisted and read as the exploration of life she dares venture, upsetting traditional norms of accepted pattern of sexuality. But a detailed study of the text to see the effect of it in the society and the reason for its immense popularity will show us that the make-believe liberation for women is absent in the text.

The text's major focus is on the choice of the woman to follow the lifestyle option introduced to her by the major male character, but we tend to take it as a result of woman's free will. How she is allured into accepting something that was initially to the extent of horrifying should be analyzed in detail. The portrayal of the fashionable lifestyle of Christian Grey, the rich bachelor who wanted Anastasia to submit to his demands, is very much in question here. His motive-driven showoff and Anastasia's eventual acceptance are confirming traditional norms of womanhood. Anastasia initially is reluctant to accept the offer of Christian to be his sex slave, but after a psychological anguish she accepts the deal. It should be noted that in between this denial and acceptance, there is a lavish showoff of the riches by Christian in the form of gifts and comforts, which can be hinted as the reason for Anastasia's acceptance. The longstanding representation of women as the gender attracted to material wealth is reinforced here.

The very cover picture of the first book is a tie that at the same time represents enticing corporate lifestyle of the hero and helpless addiction of the major characters – the male protagonist to his lifestyle and the female protagonist to him. Christian is shown as a person of quality choice when it comes to fashion and lifestyle. For the first time when he is introduced, he is shown as a man of discriminating lifestyle with two beautiful young blondes as office staff, spacious working space, and wearing rich attire. At the same time, Anastasia is introduced as an antithesis to this, she is rather simple, paranoid, and always intimidated by the flaunting riches that her eyes witnessed in Christian's office.

In the course of time, Christian takes Anastasia for a ride in his personal helicopter and gifts her first an I-phone, then a laptop, and later a costly car. While giving her a car, Christian makes sure that the old one is disposed off. He really wants her to move on from her past. All this assures that Christian is clearly motivated for sexual prospects with Anastasia. There is no point in the novel where Anastasia is shown as an exploitative woman who makes use of Christian's riches by manipulating him. It happens gradually, as a result of psychological torment. If the text is picturing a woman who is in control of her emotions and actions, it can be fairly argued as a text favoring feminism, but on the contrary, it shows a woman who is incapable of making a good decisions for her wellbeing, it shows a woman who is gradually manipulated into succumbing to the whims of a sadist billionaire.

Here Anastasia is shown as changing her attitude gradually towards Christian, enticed by his material riches and lavish lifestyle. She is against the proposal of Grey to be his almost sexual slave in the beginning. But she herself calls him once she is heavily boozed. Again, there is an elaborate show off of Christian's lifestyle. She wakes up to see the expensive flat with breakfast ready on the table. Christian is shown as a person conscious of health, he jogs every day. When he gets back after a run, he removes his shirt to show his torso. Anastasia is attracted to his physique as well. He is a socially accepted and respected person, and gives valedictory speech in Anastasia's college. Anastasia is impressed by this as well. She chooses him as a partner over another college friend whom she knows for a long time and who tries to make moves with her. All these confirm traditional image of women as looking to be provided for by a muscular man who will fight life for her, an image that dates back to cave age. When he is into the most perverted BDSM culture, he talks about himself as against

necrophilia, clearing off his image as a choosy pervert, not a complete one. All the pieces of attire Christian uses reflect his richness; his cars are all expensive and he is most of the time accompanied by a sturdy bodyguard.

For the first time when Christian meets Anastasia's mother, he describes his choice of drink in an elaborate way, this really impresses her mother. Again women as attracted to refined taste and riches is shown here. Anastasia's friend and roommate also asks her to continue the relationship; this is not based on a detailed knowledge of Christian's character but knowing the fact that Christian is wealthy. Throughout the work, there are several instances where women voice for Christian, putting him on a pedestal, acknowledging him as a gentleman, while he himself reveals to Anastasia that he had been in relationship with more than a dozen women in the BDSM way. But considering his 'other qualities,' this is forgiven by Anastasia.

Christian never hides his intentions with Anastasia. In the first meeting, he reveals that he is a man of power and control in all aspects of life. But this, in turn, makes Anastasia want him more. The accepted norms about women as inferior and finding pleasure in that subjugated status is again given fortification here.

"Oh, I exercise power over all things, Miss Steele," he says without a trace of humor in his smile. (James 10)

And her thought was

Why does he have such an unnerving effect on me?

The BDSM culture is taken as just another sexual choice in the work. Even without being judgmental about this so far identified as deviated method, the 'liberation' question can be addressed. As Grey's lifestyle is explicated slowly, he takes Anastasia to a 'playroom' where different tools and gears are displayed. There are elaborate justifications at different instances to naturalize the culture by shaking off the stigma and horror associated with BDSM.

"There's a very fine line between pleasure and pain. They are two sides of the same coin, one not existing without the other." (126)

...

"So you'll get your kicks by exerting your will over me."

"It's about gaining your trust and your respect, so you'll let me exert my will over you. I will gain a great deal of pleasure, joy, even in your submission. The more you submit, the greater my joy – it's a very simple equation."

"Okay, and what do I get out of this?"

He shrugs and looks almost apologetic.

"Me," he says simply. (212)

James' work, in fact, succeeds in that. But at no point the traditional norms of sexuality (men as controlling and superior or women as inferior and object) are questioned. The work eventually shows how Christian controls and manipulates Anastasia for his pleasures in the guise of a mutual participation in the affair. But Anastasia is rather a tool in Christian's room than a participant. It is also hinted that it is another women who gets Christian into the BDSM lifestyle, so a woman as the root cause of the whole trouble is also mentioned. Christian might be the reason for the trouble for numerous people. But it is a woman who is the Dr. Frankenstein in this context, which is just another instant of defaming woman.

[Ana says] "You're a sadist?"
"I'm a Dominant." His eyes are a scorching gray, intense.
"What does that mean?" I whisper.
"It means I want you to willingly surrender yourself to me, in all things."
I frown at him as I try to assimilate this idea.
"Why would I do that?"
"To please me," he whispers as he cocks his head to one side, and I see a ghost of a smile.
Please him! He wants me to please him! I think my mouth drops open. Please Christian Grey. And I realize, in that moment, that yes, that's exactly what I want to do. I want him to be damned delighted with me. It's a revelation. (149)
...
"I want you sore, baby," he murmurs, and he continues his sweet, leisurely torment, backward, forward. "Every time you move tomorrow, I want you to be reminded that I've been here. Only me. You are mine." (320)

Even minute details like Christian's treatment of his own mother as 'an annoyance' when she visits him unannounced and having only tall beautiful well-shaped blonde women in the office as assistants can be counted as instances for defamed treatment of women. Even when Christian uses Anastasia in BDSM ways by tying her up, there is no place for love in his life. He never even allows Anastasia to touch him, thus showing his authority over women.

Why don't you like to be touched?
I whisper, staring up into soft gray eyes. Because I'm fifty shades of fucked up, Anastasia. (369)
...
The woman who brought me into this world was a crack whore, Anastasia ... I slip into a dazed and exhausted sleep, dreaming of a four-year-old gray-eyed boy in a dark, scary, miserable place. (367)

He uses Anastasia for his own pleasure not for a mutual participation. After threatening Anastasia scores of times about a punishment, in the end he beats her mercilessly justifying his act as a part of the lifestyle they are engaged in. Even though it is shown that she breaks away from her blind affection to Christian, the sequels show how she is returning to him eventually.

The work's popularity is a hindrance in ruling it out as a sheer nonsense. The collective urge to appreciate a prejudiced work like *Fifty Shades of Grey* can be explained by using 'Uses and Gratifications Theory.' This theory explains that people will always tend to choose media to satisfy their implicit needs, whether it is the need to fulfill emotional wanting or intellectual curiosity. *Fifty Shades of Grey* provides material for raw emotions while pleasing a wide range of people.

The fact that people tend to choose media of their choice to meet their demands is confirmed. Now we have to look into the psychoanalytic theories of Freud which explain why people choose certain stimulus over the other. Freud says people always tend to seek pleasure and try to avoid pain. Everyone give prior concern to instincts more than reason. To satisfy biological and psychological needs, people tend to engage in activities which satisfy their instincts. The term 'Pleasure Principle' explains this desire to seek what basic instincts want. Now our basic instincts will always drive us to enjoy violence, sex, and passion. Civilizations from primitive times knew about this and were always formulating methods to check the same. That *Fifty Shades of Grey* is pleasing our instincts is not

undisclosed. With a fair amount of social acceptance and people coming forward voicing for the work, anyone would appreciate it as it is our hypocrisy that kept civilization intact after all.

The first time when Anastasia meets Christian, she falls down in front of him.

“I push open the door and stumble through, tripping over my own feet and falling head first into the office. Double crap—me and my two left feet!” (7)

This is symbolic of whatever that is ahead. Womanhood surrendering to larger patriarchal setup which is strong, rich, and pompous enough to manipulate female consciousness into believing whatever is happening is natural. Popularity of a book like *Fifty Shades of Grey* should be looked at critically. Whether it's an epoch-making work of art or another piece of forgettable erotica, the book has reached to millions of libraries across the world. Under the guise of celebrating female sexuality and liberation, the work is reinforcing the patriarchal ideologies with improved vigor. The book is read and appreciated to the foreground of the time when our country is about to block pornography and we have legally banned soft-porn magazines. *Fifty shades of Grey* is just an imported elite version of porn knit into a perfect story line. Whether to accept it or to reject it is a question better left to judgment of the time and space.

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