

## BDSM, Feminism and Pop Culture

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### Abstract

With the overwhelming popularity followed by overblown decrying of E. L. James's kinky trilogy, *Fifty Shades of Grey*, BDSM (Bondage & Discipline, Domination & Submission, Sadism & Masochism) has finally not only come out of its metaphorical (and literal) dungeon but has infiltrated the mainstream popular culture completely. It would be wrong to say that James's controversial trilogy is the first (or even a fine) example of kink in pop culture but it has definitely started a surge of debates, analysis and criticism of not only the trilogy itself but also of BDSM as an alternative sexual lifestyle. This paper attempts to explore the effects of BDSM's presence in popular culture with respect to feminism(s) and female autonomy, and also the effects of media representation of BDSM on not only the kink community but also the mainstream culture.

**Keywords:** Feminism, Pop Culture, BDSM, culture ..

BDSM can be seen everywhere, from the movies (*Secretary, Exit to Eden, The Wedding Crashers, Nine and a Half Weeks, Fifty Shades of Grey*), TV shows (*The Secret Diary of a Call Girl, CSI, The Surreal Life, Sex and the City, Desperate Housewives, The Family Guy*), music videos of popular celebrities (*Rihanna, Madonna, Christina Aguilera, Nine Inch Nails, 30 Seconds to Mars, Janet Jackson, Britney Spears, Adam Levine, Justin Timberlake*), popular erotic romances (*Cherise Sinclair, Joey W. Hill, Kim Dare, Chris Owen, Kitty Thomas, Anne Rice*) to regular advertisements . Over the course of thirty years, the popular representations of BDSM have shifted from dark images of "shocking and dangerous other"<sup>1</sup> to something almost mundane. Feminists have been battling it out on the issue of BDSM since the early '80s. There is the question of whether BDSM is a feminist triumph, a shift from female sexual objectification to sexual subjectification, or it actually bolsters the rape culture by eroticizing violence.

The conservative, anti-BDSM feminists believe that not only female submission led to oppression and abuse but it also replicates the very patriarchal power dynamics that the feminists are fighting against. Even the lesbian kinksters are condemned for following "the very masculine power dynamics used to perpetuate women's oppression"<sup>2</sup>. These feminists not only ignore the female submissive's right to choose what she wants to do in her own bedroom but also suggest 'curing' them of their kink (much like gays are expected to 'cure' themselves of their sexual

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orientation). Norma Ramos in 1995 issue of *Ms Magazine* states that “women are socialized into actually getting sexual pleasure through their powerlessness”. Therefore, their choice does not matter if the act involves female submission or violence. Stacey May Fowles talks about the effects of this kinkophobia on the psychology of the female sexual submissive, “there is guilt and shame among women who have fantasies of their own volition and express a desire to be demeaned”. Patrick (formerly Pat) Califia similarly says that “internalized kinkophobia is the unique sense of shame that many, if not most, sadomasochists feel about their participation in a deviant society”.

Such kind of guilt and self-hatred can be particularly strong and destructive among feminist sexual submissives. The anti-BDSM feminists and the sexist society at large fail to understand the idea that a woman can submit sexually and still be a strong, independent woman in the external world. Fowles goes on saying “I always felt that by claiming submissive status I was being highlighted as part of a social dynamic that sought to violate all women. Sadly, claims of sexual emancipation do not translate into acceptance for submissives”. In a world where vibrators and sex toys are celebrated for being symbols of women reaching out for their own pleasure, if a woman admits to enjoying bondage, sexual domination, erotic pain and other such kinks, she is immediately labelled as “sick, stupid, warped, brainwashed, under-duress, dupes of the patriarchy” (Gayle Rubin in her book *Deviations*). Rubin further states that “the habit of explaining away sexual variation by putting it down needs to be broken”. By condemning the submissive and disregarding her agency, anti-BDSM critics try to take away her female autonomy.

In the 2002 indie movie *Secretary*, Lee, the female protagonist who is the submissive, is shown making decisions and going for what she wants again and again. She is shown as consciously making her own choices, taking initiative to further her relationship with the Dominant lawyer Edward Grey, acting as a brat so that she can get more spankings and punishment once she discovers she likes them and in fact yelling at Mr Grey when he tries to send her away after breaking their relationship. She is definitely shown as a meek, emotionally unstable woman in the beginning but she exhibits increasing inner strength and confidence as she blossoms sexually. These are not the signs of an abused woman. The projection of female submissive and BDSM in the media is very problematic. It is important to understand that BDSM is not just about whips and chains and leather.

The psychological and emotional aspect of BDSM play is explored very well by erotica writers like Cherise Sinclair and Joey Hill. In these romances we discover the idea of freedom that underlines submission. In Joey Hill’s *Knights of the Boardroom Series*, each female protagonist is a strong, successful, independent woman who submits to the Dom only because she enjoys the sexual submission and the freedom it brings with it. There is the idea of surrendering for a while in a safe environment in a safe community to a person who deserves (and enjoys) your submission and is capable of taking away your responsibilities for that period and giving you maximum pleasure. There is freedom in that helplessness but only because the sub knows psychologically that she (or he) is safe and in the hands of a trusted one. Cherise Sinclair’s novels bring out the sense of community and family that the kinksters have. She gives us glimpses of a tight-knit community that looks out for each other. These things are missing in the representation of BDSM in the movies and TV shows and even the news media. There the

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kinksters are either criticised, laughed at or labelled as a victim of abuse who needs kink to cope and heal.

The idea of a female dominant (domme) is slightly more acceptable to the feminists. The representation of domme in the media is more prevalent as well as more problematic. Where the female submissive is shown to be spineless and weak, the domme is mostly shown as a severe looking older woman in tight corsets, PVC suits and mile-high heels with a ice-queen expression and a whip always nearby. This image of a domme in rigidly feminizing outfits serves the purpose of reminding that it is a female being dominant and at the same time it almost turns her into a caricature. There is the idea that since she is a female, her domination is not real but a role that she adopts with the outfit and that outfit presents her for a visual sexual feast for the male gaze. Further, if the domination is not real, then the submission of the man is also not real which needs to be affirmed to protect the masculine sense of power. This also raises the question of whether a 'real man' submits to a woman (or a man) or is his masculinity compromised because of his submission.

In the TV show *Secret Diary of a Call Girl*, based on the autobiographical memoirs of a real life 'happy hooker'<sup>3</sup>, the protagonist is a prostitute who has chosen prostitution as a career on her own. The idea to present prostitution as a career choice that can be taken by smart, strong young women would have been very feminist if not for the fact that the producers assumed such a woman can only be a dominant despite Belle's mention in the book that she enjoys masochism and humiliation in her own life. While the series provides some good viewer education by showing the use of safewords, techniques of administering pain, humiliation and other such things, its projection of a domme comes out to be very prejudiced. Not only the outfit and image, there is also the suggestion that a female dominant takes out her anger at patriarchy and male oppression on her male submissive which goes against one of the most basic tenets of BDSM play.

In a scene of the show where Belle takes out her anger by flogging her sub brutally and even ignores his safeword for a while creates two problems. One, this idea of a domme not being a competent dominant and letting her emotions interfere with her play is sexist. Two, the idea that since it is a woman beating a man (since it crosses the realm of consent and turns into abuse once he says his safeword) is not considered objectionable and is even considered to be comical is extremely problematic. It is still an on-going quest to find a media representation of a small, non-slim, non-white, competent domme who administers a spanking in casual clothes. The representation of lesbian D/S relationships or interactions is again found to be problematized with the idea of the male gaze. There is a lack of lesbian kinky relationship in the mainstream media which is not done for the direct or voyeuristic pleasure of a man.

The idea of power dynamics in BDSM is very subversive. As Pepper Mint from the blog *Freaksexual* says, "BDSM play power stands in contrast to most forms of power in the wider culture, which are actually non-consensual". This idea is echoed by another blogger violetwhite who says, "It's ironic that the most perverse manipulations of power in my life occurred in a past vanilla relationship, where I tolerated tyranny because the normative structure of our relationship obscured the fact that that is what it was". Pepper Mint explains this by suggesting that BDSM takes power roles, strips them of their original connotations and cultural positions, and turns them into 'free-floating' props to use according to one's preferences and inclinations. BDSM 'play' is

often called a ‘scene’. The very word suggests the idea of scripted role-play.

The power dynamics and everything in a scene is discussed or at the least agreed to in advance by both the Dom and Sub and consent is constantly sought at every point. The concepts of ‘safe word’, ‘soft limits’ and ‘hard limits’ are there for the protection of both Dom and Sub, and are part of even 24/7 D/S relationships. This gives a lot of power to the sub who can stop a scene if she or he wants at any time. This not only prevents abuse in BDSM but also dismantles the very tropes on which rape culture exists. The absence of these ideas from mainstream media’s representation of BDSM not only violates some very essential rules of the lifestyle but also create danger for practitioners. While the mainstream media fails to project these significant dynamics of BDSM, BDSM pornography is actually found to be very conscious of its effect. Peter Acworth, the CEO and founder of the popular porn website, Kink.com, says, “each movie includes a before and after interview with the participants in order to show that the activities are negotiated and are for the enjoyment of all participants (not just the guy). In the absence of such an introduction, we feel that the activities could be misrepresented by some people who are not used to seeing such material”<sup>4</sup>.

Pornography is no longer limited to a few select people but has become a very common tool used for pleasure by not only men but also women and youngsters with the advent of internet and availability of free porn. As Fowles suggests, the fantasy of bondage, erotic torture and non-consensual sex is no longer reserved for those viewers who know the actual dynamics of consensual non-consent. This unrestrained availability of BDSM in form of porn not only attracts the wrong kind of people who abuse under the guise of BDSM but “trains viewers who don’t have a BDSM cultural awareness, investment or education to believe that what women want is to be coerced and, in some cases, forced into acts they don’t consent to”. According to many reports, the portrayal of BDSM in James’s *Fifty Shades* has led many women to live in a manipulative, abusive relationship because the book led them to believe that is what BDSM is like and its popularity among women has led to many young men imitate Christian Grey in real life thinking that is what women find attractive. The constant availability of such images and projections has blurred the lines between rape and kinky sex.

While mainstreaming of BDSM has had a positive effect for the kink community to some extent, it cannot be called completely politically progressive for the acceptance of BDSM as a sexual orientation. One of the main concerns that kink community has is that they are represented in the media as pathological victims. Over the years, erotic romances have helped in presenting kinky people as healthy, emotionally stable, well-adjusted, functioning members of society who fall in love like everyone else. Patrick Califia has criticised the earlier representations, “We are supposed to be content with existing as two-dimensional caricatures of vanilla people’s erotic paranoia, emerging from our warrens only after dark, always clad in body-hugging fetish gear, having no real lives outside of public dungeon clubs and “violent” pornography”<sup>5</sup>. Weiss suggests that the acceptance of BDSM has come in the form of appropriation where the D/S relationship is accepted only if it somehow fits into what is considered normative and is being turned into mundane by taking away its edges. Visibility leads to acceptance, understanding and then sexual freedom. But this cannot be achieved until BDSM sexuality is accepted with all its edges and the mainstream media takes it seriously.

**Notes**

1. The quote is from Margot Weiss's essay 'Mainstreaming Kink'. Most of the examples of media representations of BDSM mentioned here have been catalogued by Weiss in that essay.
2. The quote is from Jocelyn Boryczka's book 'Suspect Citizens'.
3. The case of Belle De Jour's 'Secret Diary of a Call Girl' has been discussed by Catherine Scott in her series on BDSM in Bitch magazine.
4. Peter Acworth was quoted by Karl Frankel in his essay 'Kinky Sex: When Did BDSM Become So Wildly Popular'
5. Patrick Califia's quotes have been taken from his book 'Speaking Sex to Power'.

**References**

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Freaksexual blog