

FIFTY SHADES OF ABUSIVE ROMANCE

Yutong Xie

On Valentine's Day 2015, the film *Fifty Shades of Grey* was released in theaters and immediately became a box office success, eventually earning more than \$569 million worldwide and initiating a huge wave of discussion on social media. The film is based on the eponymous erotic romance novel by E.L. James, a story of a relationship between a shy and awkward college graduate, Anastasia Steele, and a young business magnate, Christian Grey. The novel upon which the film is based has sold more than 90 million copies in e-book and print since it was released. It is notorious for scenes featuring sexual dominance, submission, sadism and masochism.

Among numerous comments about this film, noteworthy criticism has arisen from the National Center on Sexual Exploitation (NCSE), a feminist organization that advocates for equal rights and safe environments for women. The NCSE started two petitions to boycott the film's release because its content promotes "torture as sexually gratifying and normalize[s] domestic violence." The organization also created a website, FIFTYSHADESISABUSE.com, to call public attention to this issue. Members of NCSE claim that *Fifty Shades of Grey*, with its portrayal of master-slave gender roles, portrays women as submissive and promotes their unequal social status. They suggest that the popularity of this movie sends a message to men that masochism is what "women really want" because Anastasia is sexually satisfied by Grey's overwhelming power. Most significantly, the NCSE states that the movie and its marketing are disseminating normative gender roles. The representations of Grey and Anastasia's relationship in the film reinforce gender-specific behavioral standards that perpetuate gender discrimination: men are rewarded for being tough and women for being soft. While gender inequality has long troubled human beings and feminism has gained widespread support, media products depicting women as weaker and more submissive than men still rake in huge profits. Even worse, according to *Vogue*, "*Universal* is reporting that 68 percent of all ticket

holders [for *Fifty Shades of Grey*] were female.” Why would women want to watch something so detrimental to their own interests?

The relationship between the characters of *Fifty Shades of Grey* is built on and reinforces what Susan Brownmiller named the “rule of gender identification” in her essay “Femininity” (205). Through her childhood experience of helping her mother to set the table—a feminine chore—she learned that “men were straightedged, sharply pronged and formidable,” like forks, and women “were softly curved and held the food in a rounded well” like spoons (205). Such gender identification sets certain expectations for both men and women. Like putting a baby boy in blue and a baby girl in pink, there exists “an orderly way of viewing the world” (205). This order teaches people to behave according to their genders and sets our expectations of others’ behavior: while men should take control and strive for superiority, women should be delicate and soft. Women learn that being fragile and innocent like Anastasia can attract someone powerful like Mr. Grey, who can satisfy them and give love in exchange for being controlled and passive in the relationship. In turn, Mr. Grey’s reward is the reinforcement of his traditional masculinity. As Brownmiller observes in her essay, “femininity pleases men because it makes them appear more masculine by contrast” (207). Setting the tone for their relationship, Anastasia and Grey’s first meeting takes place in Grey’s capacious and fancy office. Grey, wearing a mysterious, attractive smile, is dressed in a suit and tie, while Anastasia is a pale, shy girl in a T-shirt and Converse shoes. The social contrast between them is underscored by Grey’s overwhelming confidence and Anastasia’s rather obvious anxiety. Anastasia is so nervous that she even forgets to bring a pen for her interview with Grey the first time they meet. As the film progresses, Grey’s power over Anastasia informs their positions in the relationship: the distance between a college girl and a successful entrepreneur becomes the distance between the one who is controlled and the one who takes control. Even though we are shown Anastasia and Grey growing closer, it becomes clear that their romance is an illusion that masks eroticized violence and sexism. In essence, this is femininity: “a romantic sentiment, a nostalgic tradition of imposed limitation” (Brownmiller 206).

Perhaps this is why women who watch *Fifty Shades of Gray* find its traditional use of “limitation” satisfying, as it appeals to their understanding of

power structures. On Valentine's Day, a typical masculine partner of a typical feminine woman might schedule a romantic day for her to include a bunch of red roses, a fancy dinner, and a late-night romantic movie. The woman can enjoy this arrangement without paying a penny. Her acceptance of such a feminine role designates her in need of the support and care of her masculine partner, implying she is less powerful. Therefore, in a society where a woman's access to power is mediated by the man, femininity still seems like a favorable thing. Traditions like "ladies first" are typically viewed as women's privilege. A woman can live a life as a housewife supported by her husband; yet a man would be judged if he relied financially on his wife. In such a society, women are protected by and rely on men. This idea may have a certain appeal for modern women, who often have to compete for jobs in a society that is still inclined to hire men and pay them more than women. However, we cannot ignore the fact that women build up their femininity by "accepting restrictions, by limiting one's sights, by choosing an indirect route, by scattering concentration and not giving one's all as a man would do to his own, certifiably masculine, interests" (Brownmiller 206). If women sacrifice equality for so-called "privilege," their only route to power is through seduction and commitment to a man. All privileges available to women would be limited by and negotiated through heterosexual romance.

If femininity, the "romantic sentiment" in Brownmiller's words, can be viewed as the bedrock of gender inequality, then the romance-entertainment complex is the reinforced steel bar atop it. As she tries to understand the phenomenon of romantic love in her essay "Romance versus Love," Gloria Steinem speculates that people, under the gradual influence of "gender identification," become increasingly incomplete as they grow up (258). Steinem thinks that we are born as people with "full circle[s] of human qualities," but as we play the assigned gender roles that "divide labor, assign behavior, provide the paradigm for race and class, and are so accepted that they may be seen as part of nature," we lose touch with the qualities relegated to the opposite gender (257). That is to say, the polarization of femininity and masculinity forces people to abandon qualities of the opposite gender. We begin to imagine that these qualities are not available within us and seek them in a partner. Gradually, because the inner psychic balance is upset, we become needy, and, along the journey of finding wholeness, we "will try to absorb and

possess someone else” to complete ourselves (Steinem 257). Desiring these absent qualities, the inner search for completeness can generate the romantic fever kindled by films like *Fifty Shades of Grey*. The popularity of such films, especially among women, might be an expression of the fantasy to possess the unattainable qualities by succumbing to an “imposed limitation” (Brownmiller 206). Although women today are more independent, they may still long for this kind of romance informed by traditional gender roles. In this view, their independence, to a certain degree, depends on their ability to perform masculinity and to suppress assumed feminine qualities such as dependence and vulnerability. Constructed in this way, femininity traps women in an awkward dilemma: while women need to exhibit independence and decisiveness to get to a position of power, they can be accused of being too forceful, too aggressive, too ‘manly.’ As long as gender division exists in our imagination—even if only connected to abstract concepts (like power, dependence, and self-sufficiency)—women will struggle to achieve equality, and they will be lured back to the old models of achieving power through domesticity or possession of a man. *Fifty Shades of Grey* thus resorts to the traditional model of femininity: power only through submission.

It would be easy to dismiss *Fifty Shades of Grey* as an anomaly or as yet another steamy romance for bored housewives. We may think that adult women reading it have the power to distinguish reality from illusion and that they indulge this fantasy responsibly. But this instance of romanticized sexism represents a deep-rooted tradition in popular cinema and literature that appeals to younger generations. In fact, the novel *Fifty Shades of Grey* was developed from a *Twilight* fan fiction series, tellingly named *Master of the Universe* and based on the characters of Edward Cullen and Bella Swan. *Fifty Shades of Grey* bears striking similarities to *Twilight*: both are love stories about an ordinary woman and an extraordinary man. When *Twilight* came out years ago, I was in middle school in a small city in China and almost every girl in my class, including myself, fantasized about getting married to Edward Cullen. Teenage girls can easily be affected by this kind of daydream fantasy, and this fantasy does not fade with time. When teenage girls grow up, they will still be bound by this feminine dream. Films like *Twilight* and *Fifty Shades of Grey* can influence teenage girls’ life choices and prompt them to invest in the hope of finding “Mr. Right.”

However, we cannot blame only the media industry for disseminating these messages. The industry creates products based on people's interest and thus the potential for profit. Like a mirror for our desires, the media show us what we want. Our desires, though, are often formed by our social environments. Entrenched cultural traditions make us look for movies or literature that indulge our fantasies. The fantasy of romance based on what Steinem would call "incompleteness" becomes, then, yet another source of profit for the media industry (259). In her book *The Will to Change*, bell hooks contemplates possibilities for breaking out of the "predetermined, gendered script" set for both men and women by a patriarchal society (19). hooks says that coping with our "incompleteness" and fighting gender inequality might not only be a matter of learning about the ways we are oppressed but also a matter of unlearning them. Women have to unlearn the traditional desire for a master (like rich and handsome Grey) and claim their own existence.

The search for love unites people, gives them hope, and creates happiness. But when this beautiful search camouflages discrimination and patriarchy, love will no longer bring unity and hope, but will obscure the real problem of gender division and inequality. When women sacrifice their jobs and social lives to raise children, people call it love. When so-called love, the mask for patriarchal demands, keeps women from being their real selves, we must stop and reflect on whether we are wrong for using love as an excuse for discrimination. We are not slaves of love. Love is not the problem. The yearning, the nostalgia, the incomplete self are. If we unlearn "romantic fantasy," and presumed social categories, gradually, we might become complete and satisfied within ourselves and therefore capable of genuine love (Brownmiller 206).

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