

# My Fifty Shades of Grey: The Ambivalence of Sexism in E.L. James Erotica

Agnes M. Sunga

Polytechnic University of the Philippines

amsunga@pup.edu.ph

## Abstract

This paper focuses on the manifestation of two forms of sexism in the popular novel of E.L. James. By making use of content analysis, a method used to obtain the objective, systematic, and content manifest of communication, this research seeks to find a weave of similar patterns present in the literary work. The representation of patriarchy, sexism, and gender stereotypes through the characters, plot, setting, theme, and literary symbols employed in the story were used as coding categories in the novel. The author made use of Glick and Fiske's concept of hostile and benevolent sexism to create a distinction between two forms of sexism that were present in two literary works. The former is the most common and antagonistic way of discriminating and dominating women, while the other can elicit positive responses and is usually attributed to a display of good character like chivalry. Through this distinction, the study explores how this popular literature continues to propagate gender stereotypes. It examines how different media such as film, television, and popular literature, in particular, continue to serve as powerful platforms of ideology/models on how women will come to define themselves in relation to the "other."

**Keywords:** *sexism, patriarchy, gender stereotypes, literary works, ideology*

## INTRODUCTION

Literature has played a significant role in redefining society. In the history of humanity, many books helped change and transform society where it arose. Mao Tse-tung's *Little Red Book* completely changed the cultural and political landscape of China, Rousseau's *Emile* had a lasting influence on the development of many pedagogies, and Jose Rizal's *Noli and Fili* were instrumental in awakening the revolutionary spirit of the Filipinos. All of them were a reaction to what seemed to be the ills and

shortcomings of their age. So, feminism, by speaking and dreaming of a world where all sexes and genders co-exist without color or borders, can also look at literature particularly that of women's writing as an instrument of that aspiration. Thus, there is also an invitation for us to read and re-read these literary works. As one author puts it,

The question of how women read – their predecessors, their contemporaries; how they read works not of polemicism but of art-engages me, as it engages [other literary critics], because this attention to [changing] style [of women's literary criticism] can offer us double opportunity: it can enable us to read in a more focused, more fundamental ways, women artists who have created new opportunities for us, and it can enable us to disengage from the structures constraining us (Roe 1987, 4).

The previous study that I made on the Filipino pocketbook romance – Kristine Series of Martha Cecilia (2012) and its surprising similarity with E.L. James' novel has inspired me to use the same framework on *Fifty Shades*. I was appalled to find out how a certain literary work that originated from a totally different background shares a striking resemblance with our own popular literature. The most notable ones were that: both authors were 'regular' working mothers and were not literary geniuses; and both books have adaptations and are serialized. Their huge following widely affected the way the story was written<sup>1</sup>, both of which featured extremely wealthy, good-looking men falling for the simple innocent girl. It also comes with a very vivid description of the lifestyle of the rich and famous. Based on the premise that there is an essential time and cultural difference between the two books, does this lead to the conclusion that the representation of women in literature is a universal one? Does this validate what Simone de Beauvoir said that women's oppression was prior to class and racial domination? Thus, it is the goal of this paper to explore and trace if there are weaves or patterns of sexism that justify patriarchy and gender stereotypes in *Fifty Shades*. How does this conventional representation of women ultimately lead to its acceptance?

---

<sup>1</sup> It is said that E.L. James has continually written this fan fiction for two years, was because her online followers kept asking what was going to happen next. Martha Cecilia on the other hand was prompted to rewrite the plot of the Kristine Series because her fans have threatened to boycott the publishing house if their favorite character will not be taken back to life.

## From Pocketbooks Romance to Erotica

The plurality of themes, the number of writers, and the many forms represent the vastness and richness of literature. Its landscape and its language change from time to time, but there is one genre that has stood the test of time and has been the staple and the constant theme of many novels, stories, films, and soap operas – romance. According to Bateman (2015), it can be incorporated into action, sci-fi, fairy tale, and mythology but there is one focus in the storyline that will never change no matter what else is going on, the main focus is on the hero and heroine, and their growing love for each other.

In the era of modernity, much so now with the advancement in information technology, despite the presence of other forms of entertainment, the popularity of online platforms, and electronic gadgets; the romantic genre's ability to bring readers under its spell persists. It must have taken a new format online like the fanfiction, text stories, and Wattpadd but these were simply reboots or remakes of their predecessors; Precious Hearts Romance and its foreign counterpart Mills and Boon/Harlequin Romance. This has gained a wide readership for so long, because of its romantic content and feel-good ending.

This particular literary form remains a staple of popular literature. It has resurrected and recreated itself over the past years. But not long after other publishers launched their romance titles, they discovered that a commercially successful romance novel requires more than a simple handsome male-meets-cute-female formula. Unsuccessful lines and subgenres soon disappeared from the market. Since then, the romance market has been ever-changing, as new lines are brought out and foundering lines and subgenres are abandoned (Bateman 2015).

Many writers now add a bit or a lot of sexual content using the same plot and the same ingredient, giving birth to a new genre of erotica perhaps, the most popular novel of this kind *Fifty Shades of Grey*, by British writer, Erika Leonard James. Hazel Cushion, an erotica publisher (as cited in Elis-Peterson, H., 2015) wrote that the success of *Fifty Shades of Grey* created a huge impact on the genre because it removed the “brown bag” taboo attached to erotica. She further said that people like E.L. James' novel for two simple reasons – we are all hopeless romantics and we are very much drawn to its very strong love story, and it was able to provide an escape from our everyday life

especially when it highlights BDSM (Bondage, Discipline/Domination, Submission/Sadism and Masochism).

## E. L. James, from *Twilight* to the *Master of the Universe* to *Fifty Shades of Grey*

Erika Leonard James or E.L. James is a British writer who became a household name due to the huge success of the *Fifty Shades* erotic series. James was born in 1963 in London, England. She studied history in college, and was a former TV Producer. Just like Martha Cecilia, she is not an experienced writer. Erika lacks proper training as a literary author but admitted that she is indeed hooked on romantic stories. She is an avid fan of Stephen Meyer's *Twilight* Saga, so much so that she wrote fanfiction online about the continuation of the love story of Bella and Edward using the pen name Snowqueens Iced Dragon. According to [urbandictionary.com](http://urbandictionary.com), fanfiction is when someone takes either the story or characters (or both) of a certain piece of work, whether it be a novel, TV show, movie, etc., and creates their own story based on it. Sometimes people will take characters from one movie and put them in another, which is called crossover.

James recreated a new story by deviating from the vampire chronicle that focuses on the immortal love story of a vampire and a human being. She put an entirely new spin by transforming the characters into a naïve university student and a wealthy billionaire. She took the plot even further by incorporating a lot of eroticism. James' narrative highlights the sexual relationship between the innocent Anastasia Steele and (Bondage, Discipline/ Domination, Submission, Sadism, and Masochism) BDSM- obsessed wealthy, good-looking billionaire Christian Grey. Her unique take on the said popular novel has earned her a large number of female readers. It became extremely popular online that for the whole two years. She continuously wrote fanfiction as *Master of the Universe I and II*.

It was edited by her husband, published (as a book and e-book) and released in May and September 2011 respectively as *Fifty Shades of Grey* and *Fifty Shades Darker*; *Fifty Shades Freed* was published by Knopf Doubleday in January 2012 (Ray, M., 2010). As well, her books became the best-selling books of all time on Amazon Kindle and were translated into fifty language.

Due to its huge success (selling about 100 million copies worldwide and being one of the fastest-selling novels of our time), *Fifty Shades* has redefined digital and print publishing, and has led us to reassess what we call “a good book”. In the article by Hannah Ellis-Petersen (2015), Scott Pack, a former head buyer for Waterstones and publisher for Harper Collins, who now runs the Aardvark Bureau imprint was quoted,

For years, centuries even, the publishing industry and literary world’s definition of good was the only one that mattered. If we didn’t think something was good, it didn’t get agented, it didn’t get published, bookshops didn’t stock it and it didn’t sell... For us, good is often linked to literary style, what we consider the quality of writing and so on. What *Fifty Shades* – and more widely the whole self-publishing phenomenon of the last four or five years – has proved is that readers can have a completely different definition of good.

Despite being a best seller, this novel has received a lot of whipping from critics. Some said this is bad or poorly written; it is not an accurate description of BDSM; it justifies violence towards women; and it is a fanfiction that makes *Twilight* look like *War and Peace*. An article from the *New York Times* labeled E.L. James as ‘Brontë devoid of talent’ and is credited for writing the first smash hit in the era of mommy’s naughty reader (or those who can easily download erotica to their electronic devices). According to columnist Maureen Dowd (2012), James just like the *Twilight* Saga, has capitalized on an obsessive love story between the naïve brunette college student, Anastasia Steele and the incredibly handsome billionaire, Christian Grey. Compared to other literature that also features dominant-submissive, it does not have the ‘make-you-shiver-down-your-spine effect’ despite all the thrashing and spanking. The author was able to make a striking balance between being violent and being romantic.

## The Ambivalence of Sexism in Ana and Christian

Imagine a rich, good-looking business mogul taking you on a dreamy once-in-a-lifetime helicopter and glider ride is certainly every woman’s fantasy. To say it is romantic but it is sexist is contradictory.

A catcalling bystander is definitely offensive, but how can someone who makes you feel good be called sexist? According to Glick and Fiske (1997, 120), sexism is ambivalent, it is both hostile and benevolent, and not necessarily identified solely with a negative attitude towards women. These two forms of sexism are rooted in the acceptable dominance of males in the society and interdependence of men and women.

This kind of relationship has its origin in the old, dominant, and submissive group in society wherein the powerful group exercised control in every aspect - social, economic, and political. However, over a long of period of time, this group may show (fake or genuine) benevolence over the exploited or the colonized which can be embodied in ideologies like 'America will take care of you' thus, evoking positive response or attitude. This is the same with men and women, the former have institutional power; however, they are dependent on women as wives, mothers, and romantic objects. In that way men lend dyadic power to women, a power rooted in the men's "because I need you" condition.

The simultaneous existence of the male structural power and female dyadic power creates ambivalent sexist ideologies composed of hostile and benevolent sexism. Hostile sexism seeks to justify male power, traditional gender roles, and men's exploitation of women as sexual objects through derogatory characterizations of women. Benevolent sexism, in contrast, relies on gentler and kinder justification of male dominance and prescribed gender roles; it recognizes men's dependence on women and embraces a romanticized view of sexual relationship with women (Glick & Fiske 1997, 121).

Both forms of sexism are well-represented in the "love story" of *Fifty Shades of Grey*. Hostile sexism is manifested in the dominant and submissive relationship as stipulated in the "paper works". It can be remembered that Christian enticed Ana to sign a contract that would allow Mr. Grey to whip, spank, tie, and gag Ms. Steele. It contains a lot of rules that engenders manipulation and control over the just-out-of-college-mousy Anastasia. It includes getting a medical clearance, just like the rest of his previous fifteen submissives. Regular exercise and snacking on fruits alone, so she will not get fat. Having sex on a

specific date and time. Of course she is also expected to do anything for the pleasure of the dominant. The first time that Ana got to enter the 'red room,' such dominance had somehow caught up with her, "My subconscious has emigrated or been struck dumb or simply keeled over and expired. I am numb. I can observe and absorb but not articulate my feelings about all this, because I'm in shock. What is the appropriate response to finding out a potential lover is a complete freaky sadist or masochist? *Fear*... yes... that seems to be the overriding feeling" (James 2011, 72).

In the said novel women were also regarded as sexual objects, his employees had blonde hair while his submissives were brunettes. The protagonist wanted to make sure that he would not mix business with guilty pleasures, though he treats his 'ladies' in a business-like manner including the negotiation on how far he can hurt them during sexual acts. This includes whether he can suspend them in the ceiling, what specific leather belts he can use to spank them, what rope he can use, etc. It is also noteworthy that there are twenty-one (21) times the word playroom has been mentioned in the book (also called *The Red Room of Pain* by Ana).

According to Glick and Fiske (1997), men's sexual desires and fears with respect to women can either have hostile or benevolent overtones. Men's aim to control women came from viewing women as sexual objects while fearing them to use sexual attraction to gain control over them. Christian's obsession with dominance may have something to do with his traumatic past. But at the same time, his obsession with sexual dominance may have something to do with his fear of being overpowered by a femme fatale. Romanticizing women as sex objects is necessary for men to be 'complete'. E.L. James portrays Ana as the only submissive (despite having previously dominated 15 others) who will fill Christian's emptiness (122).

On the other hand, to make the BDSM-obsessed billionaire still attuned to the romantic fantasies of the reader, you must transform a control freak into a knight in shining armour rescuing a damsel-in-distress. Thus, in the story, we saw how Jose was knocked off by Christian when this Latino was about to take advantage of Ana. It was also completely normal for Mr. Grey to appear every time Ms. Steele was in dire need or in a helpless situation.

Mr. Grey's kind and sweet gestures towards his submissives were also highlighted in the novel such as showering them with expensive gadgets, cars, and romantic dates. This protagonist makes you swoon by his being exceptionally rich, powerful, and handsome. This somehow balances his negative attitude towards women. The typical prince charming who makes you feel like a princess while manipulating you and tying you to a bed.

To justify the male protagonist's hostile attitude towards Ana, E. L. James used popular ideologies associated with men's positive images like chivalry, knight in shining armor, being a good provider, and being a strong character. All of these seemed to be *natural* and favorable for women. Sexism in whatever form, leads to one conclusion, it entails the weakness and dependence of women on men. Readers of these novels become subjected to Althusser's identification into which s/he is a subject in a double sense. S/he becomes both the agent of the ideology in question and is subjected to it.<sup>2</sup> This process of identification inserts individuals into ideologies and ideological practices that, when they work well, are lived as if they were obvious and natural (Weedon 2004, 6).

### My Fifty Shades of Grey

The power difference between the two sexes is rationalized through two forms of ideologies of paternalism, dominative and protective, which is parallel to hostile and benevolent sexism. The former asserts that men ought to have control and power over women; the latter justifies ownership of women as wives, mothers, girlfriends, and submissives owing to the ability of men to protect them (because of having greater power, wealth, and authority). This is how both forms of sexism serve to justify patriarchy and gender stereotypes.

'Male' Gender Traits	'Female' Gender Traits
Independent	Dependent
Rational	Irrational
Rough	Gentle

<sup>2</sup> According to a research by Amy Bonami and Andy Henion (2015) of Michigan State University, young adult women who read *Fifty Shades of Grey* are more likely than non-readers to exhibit eating disorders and have verbally abusive partners.



'Male' Gender Traits	'Female' Gender Traits
Insensitive	Sensitive
Aggressive	Placid
Competitive	Co-operative
Physical	Emotional
Disobedient	Obedient
Confident	Unconfident

The table summarizes the feminine and masculine traits usually associated with being male and female. This differentiation is based on the Ambivalent Sexism Theory, which states that creating such categories must have relevance to power and gender differentiation. In *Fifty Shades of Grey*, it can be seen that the traits on the left tell so much about the female lead's character. This further highlights and enhances the dominance and power of the male character, Christian Grey.

The polarities between the protagonists such as rich and poor, manipulative and innocent, dominant and submissive in a romantic love story setting make sexism acceptable. Female protagonists who are kind, selfless, and innocent and whose relevance in the story are intricately tied to finding their true love are based on gender stereotypes that categorize women as the weaker sex. Any attitude/characterization/representation of women that projects a woman as someone dependent on a man is a form of sexism regardless if it comes in positive or negative form.

Stories of this kind are effective transmitters of ideas, cultures, and social roles, popular literature being the literary genre that is accessible to the masses has the power to reproduce, validate, and maintain a specific status quo such as the power structure that control the relationship between man and woman. This is part of what Michel Foucault calls the "technology of sex" and proposes that gender, too, both as representation and as self-representation, is the product of various social technologies, such as cinema, and institutionalized discourses, epistemologies, and critical practices, as well as practices of daily life (de Lauretis 1987, 2).

## REFERENCES

- Althusser, L. (2003). Ideology and ideological state apparatuses. In J. Rivkin & M. Ryan (Eds.), *Literary theory: An anthology* (pp. 294-304). Malden: Blackwell Publishers.
- Bateman, F. (2015). Why is the romance genre so popular. [Post]. LinkedIn.  
<https://www.linkedin.com/posts/bateman/why-is-romance-popular>
- Ray, M. (2024, May 6). E.L. James. *Encyclopedia Britannica*.  
<https://www.britannica.com/biography/E-L-James>
- Craig, S. (Ed). (1997). Men, masculinity and the media. California: Sage Publications Inc.
- David, L. (1997). Feminism and Michel Foucault: A continual contestation. *Budhi: A Journal of ideas and culture*. Office for Research and Publications, Ateneo de Manila University, 1(3), 17-46.
- Dowd, M. (2012, March 31). She's fit to be tied. *The New York Times*.  
<https://www.nytimes.com/2012/04/01/opinion/sunday/dowd-shes-fit-to-be-tied.html>
- de Laurentis, T. (1987). Technologies of gender, essays on theory, film and fiction. Indiana: Indiana University Press.
- Eagleton, M. (Ed.). (1986). Feminist literary theory: A reader. Oxford: Basic Blackwell Ltd.
- Elis-Peterson, H. (2015, June 18). Fifty shades of grey: Series that tied publishing up in knots. *The Guardian*.  
<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/jun/18/fifty-shades-of-grey-the-series-that-tied-publishing-up-in-knots>
- Glick, P. & Fiske, S. (1996). The ambivalent sexism inventory: Differentiating hostile and benevolent sexism. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 70(3), 491-512.  
<https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.70.3.491>
- \_\_\_\_\_. (1997). Hostile and benevolent sexism: Measuring ambivalent sexist attitudes toward women. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 21(1), 119-135. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1471-6402.1997.tb00104.x>

- James, E.L. (2011). *Fifty shades of grey*. Waxahachie TX: The Writer's coffee shop.  
<https://pdfcoffee.com/james-e-fifty-shades-of-grey-pdf-free.html>
- Mc Kinnon, C. (1989). *Feminism, Marxism, method and the State*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Roe, S, ed. (1987). *Women's reading women's writing*. Brighton, Sussex: The Harvester Press Limited.
- Sunga, A. (2012). *Content analysis of selected serialized works of Martha Cecilia (1996-2007)*. [Unpublished master's thesis]. PUP Open University System, Manila.
- Weedon, C. (2004). *Identity and culture: Narratives of difference and belonging*. New York: Open University Press.
- Wood, J. (2004). *Communication theories in action*. Boston: Thomson Wadsworth.
- \_\_\_\_\_ (2008). *Gendered lives: Communication, gender and culture* (8th ed.). Boston: Thomson Wadsworth.

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

**Agnes M. Sunga-Oblefias** is Associate Professor of Philosophy at the Polytechnic University of the Philippines, Manila. She earned her master's degree in communication from the Polytechnic University of the Philippines (PUP), Manila, and her Master in Philosophical Research degree from De La Salle University, Manila. She is presently writing her dissertation for her doctoral degree in philosophy at De La Salle University, Manila. She is the current chief of the Center for Philosophy and Humanities of the PUP, Manila. Her work centers on the ways in which philosophical practices can be made more inclusive, and her research currently focuses on feminism, women's studies, gender, the Philosophy of the Body, and social media. She is also the former academic programs head of the PUP San Juan Campus.