

In Defense of *Fifty Shades* by E. L. James: Does It Really Contain Gender-Based Violence?

En defensa de *Fifty Shades* de E. L. James: ¿Realmente contiene violencia de género?

CATHAYSA SANTANA RODRÍGUEZ

Institution address: Departamento de Filología Moderna, Traducción e Interpretación. Edificio de Humanidades. Calle Pérez del Toro, 1. 35003 Las Palmas de Gran Canaria. Spain.

E-mail: cathaysa.santana101@alu.ulpgc.es

ORCID: 0009-0003-0012-6076

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Abstract: This article presents a response to the harsh criticism expressed against E. L. James's *Fifty Shades*. Accusations have been made from many sides that it encourages gender-based violence within a romantic relationship, unjustly stereotyping the female character Anastasia (Ana) as a battered, submissive, weak woman and a "sex slave." However, as this thorough analysis will argue, Anastasia does not fit the profile of a victim of gender-based violence. Rather, she embodies the traits of an empowered woman. From this viewpoint, it is unfair to consider *Fifty Shades* as promoting violence against women.

Keywords: *Fifty Shades* series of novels; gender-based violence; battered woman; empowered woman; BDSM.

Summary: Introduction. *Fifty Shades*. Gender-Based Violence: The Perfect Backdrop for Criticism. A Thorough Analysis of Anastasia's Role as an Empowered Woman. Conclusions.

Resumen: Este artículo presenta una respuesta a las duras críticas expresadas contra *Fifty Shades* de E. L. James. Muchos sectores la han acusado de fomentar la violencia de género dentro de una relación sentimental, estereotipando injustamente al personaje femenino Anastasia (Ana) como una mujer maltratada, sumisa, débil y una "esclava sexual". Sin embargo, como se argumentará en un análisis detallado, Anastasia no encaja en el perfil de una víctima de violencia de género. Más bien, refleja los rasgos de una mujer empoderada. Desde este punto de vista, es injusto considerar que *Cincuenta Sombras* promueve la violencia contra las mujeres.

Palabras clave: Serie de novelas de *Cincuenta Sombras*; violencia de género; mujer maltratada; mujer empoderada; BDSM.

Sumario: Introducción. *Fifty Shades*. Violencia de género: el telón de fondo perfecto para las críticas. Un análisis detallado del papel de Anastasia como mujer empoderada. Conclusiones.

INTRODUCTION

The best-selling *Fifty Shades* series of novels has achieved great success and has topped best-seller charts in the United Kingdom, the United States, and many other countries. By way of illustration, *Fifty Shades of Grey* became the fastest-selling book in the United Kingdom and stayed on the *New York Times* best-seller list for 133 consecutive weeks. In addition, the books have received nominations and awards: “*Fifty Shades Freed* won the Goodreads Choice Award (2012), and *Fifty Shades of Grey* was selected as one of the 100 Great Reads, as voted by readers, in PBS’s The Great American Read (2018)” (James, *Freed* 758). Because of this extraordinary success, British author Erika Leonard Mitchell, better known as E. L. James, was declared in 2012 one of Barbara Walters’s “Ten Most Fascinating People of the Year,” one of *Time* magazine’s “Most Influential People in the World,” and *Publishers Weekly*’s “Person of the Year” (James, *Grey* 561).

As well as writing the novels, E. L. James also worked as a producer on the film adaptations of her trilogy for Universal Pictures. Such as with the novels, the film adaptations became a huge hit. In fact, the *Fifty Shades* films, starring Jamie Dornan and Dakota Johnson, made more than a billion dollars at the box office (James, *Freed*). Thus, in 2015, the film adaptation of *Fifty Shades of Grey*, broke box-office records all over the world and it was followed by *Fifty Shades Darker* (2017) and *Fifty Shades Freed* (2018), which won the People’s Choice Award for Drama in 2018 (James, *Darker*, *Freed*). Yet, popularity does not mean acceptance. Despite its runaway success, *Fifty Shades* has sparked controversy among critics and feminists who have harshly criticized it. They argue that it emulates violent and aggressive patterns which encourage gender-based violence. The idea that *Fifty Shades* is nothing more than sex and porn alongside the foregrounding of BDSM (a common abbreviation for the terms Bondage and Discipline (BD) Domination and Submission (DS) Sadism and Masochism (SM)) might have contributed to this claim.

Female sexuality, porn and BDSM are still considered taboo. While many regard pornography and BDSM as stigmatized sexual practices and standardizing vehicles for violence against women, others emphasize that

pornography is fantasy and that BDSM is distinct from violence or torture because it draws on consent and sexual pleasure. Likewise, while some see *Fifty Shades* as a manual for sexual torture, others view it as a self-help manual on love, sex, and eroticism, as well as sexually liberating for women. In any case, *Fifty Shades* is not a work of psychological or social realism. It depicts a fictional love story framed within the erotic romance subgenre characterized by explicit sex, emotional bonding between the protagonists, eroticism and “a happily ever after,” including marriage and having children. These key elements of the story and characters along with the fantasy and fanfiction origins have been dismissed by many critics and feminists.

Consequently, this article presents a response to the volleys of criticism which have been launched against the *Fifty Shades* series of novels, accusing it of encouraging gender-based violence within a romantic relationship. Arising from this claim, stereotypes such as “battered,” “submissive,” “weak” or “sex slave” among others have unjustly pigeonholed the female character, Anastasia (Ana), as a victim of gender-based violence. However, as will be argued, Anastasia seems to exhibit traits that fit the profile of an empowered woman. From this viewpoint, it would be unfair to consider *Fifty Shades* as promoting violence against women. In order to carry out this defense, I first explain the origins of *Fifty Shades* along with a brief plot summary. Subsequently, I present the negative reviews. Then, I provide a thorough analysis of the female character’s role, placing special focus on her words, behavior and relationship with the male character, Christian.

1. *FIFTY SHADES*

James first conceived *Fifty Shades* as a trilogy: *Fifty Shades of Grey* (2011), *Fifty Shades Darker* (2012) and *Fifty Shades Freed* (2012). All these novels were narrated in first person by the female character, Anastasia Steele. This trilogy has been translated into fifty-two languages and more than one hundred and fifty million copies have been sold worldwide (James, *Darker*). Later on, James decided to write *Fifty Shades* in the first person from the perspective of the male character, Christian Grey. Hence, the trilogy gave place to a hexalogy with the publication of *Grey* (2015), *Darker* (2017) and *Freed* (2021).

Prior to the *Fifty Shades* series of novels, E. L. James had published *Master of the Universe*, a fanfiction for the vampire *Twilight* saga by

Stephanie Meyer, under her web name Snowqueen's Icedragon (McAlister; Schreck). According to Salam Al-Mahadin, the trilogy was written to complete "the niches and gaps James felt were left unfilled by the *Twilight* series by Stephanie Meyer (2010)" (568). However, James has never confirmed Al-Mahadin's opinion. What James has argued is that she was a fan of the *Twilight* saga ("*Fifty Shades of Grey*") and, most likely, used it as a source of inspiration not only to continue the love story between Bella Swan and Edward Cullen but also to rewrite it from a different perspective by dispensing with the supernatural phenomena present in the vampire genre and in the saga itself, and adding new elements more in line with our times such as the BDSM lifestyle, episodes of a traumatic childhood with neglect and physical abuse, and sexual harassment. Thus, *Master of the Universe*, uploaded in serial installments to a popular FanFiction forum on the Internet (Illouz 19–20), became the basis for *Fifty Shades of Grey* and the subsequent novels.

As James states, *Fifty Shades* is a love story, product of her imagination ("*Fifty Shades of Grey*"). It belongs in essence to the popular genre of romance fiction. Romances are a form of fairy tales where love and happy endings are key elements. *Fifty Shades* is a romance novel embedded within the erotic romance subgenre. Erotic romance stories are based on romantic love, portrayals of explicit, often taboo, sexual and erotic elements, and an emotionally satisfying happy ending. Sex plays an integral part in the stories and "the declaration of love between heroine and hero" (Regis 30) is one of the central elements. Further, *Fifty Shades* rests heavily on romance tropes such as "unexpected virgin," "self-made billionaire," "alpha hero," "heroine breaks hero's control and exposes his vulnerability," "hero overcomes the pain of physical and psychological scars from the past with the heroine's help" and others.

Fifty Shades narrates a passionate love story between twenty-one-year-old Anastasia Steele, a student of English literature at Washington State University and twenty-seven-year-old Christian Grey, a successful, powerful, and wealthy entrepreneur, CEO of Grey Enterprises Holdings. Both Anastasia and Christian meet for the first time at Christian's office when Anastasia interviews him for the student newspaper. From that time onward, they start dating and Christian lures Anastasia into being his submissive in a sexual relationship characterized by the BDSM lifestyle. However, as they fall in love, the initial proposal, centered on a consensual dominant/submissive relationship, will eventually turn into a romantic relationship on Anastasia's own terms.

Throughout the novels Anastasia and Christian will have to face a series of mishaps and challenges which, instead of breaking their love relationship forever, will help them reinforce it. They will realize that they cannot be without each other and that they are stronger together. To achieve this happy ending, Anastasia will play a role of paramount importance in their relationship, since her choices and decisions will help improve not only her life but also Christian's. In doing so, she will have to accept and learn to live and share Christian's powerful and wealthy lifestyle without sacrificing her own control and power over her own life, including choices and decisions concerning her work, together with her emotional and economic independence. Similarly, Christian will have to learn to love Anastasia on her own terms. He will also have to overcome the horrors, fears, nightmares of his childhood, his self-loathing, insecurity, and his need for control with the crucial help of Anastasia, who will become his best form of therapy. In the end, Anastasia and Christian, with their passionate love for each other, will break all chains. They will defeat the hindrances that limited and prevented their complete happiness, which will prove the strength of their unbreakable love and, in turn, will serve to consolidate their marriage and new role as parents.

2. GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE: THE PERFECT BACKDROP FOR CRITICISM

This section provides an overview of what most critics and feminists have expressed against *Fifty Shades*. Their critiques are often based on social or psychological realism that might not be appropriate for a novel that falls into the erotic romance subgenre that incorporates themes still considered taboo such as BDSM. Critics have always misunderstood and had a disdain for romance novels. They have condemned the repetition of thematic and structural formulas in the genre. Also, feminists have considered that romance novels perpetuate patterns of patriarchal domination and they have warned of how harmful the gender stereotypes reflected in some of these stories can be. Nonetheless, romance novels have evolved. They reflect the gradual shifts around female sexuality and independence. The portrayal of romance heroines has also changed over time, showing how women can overcome all kinds of adversity, have a successful career, find love, enjoy sex, have multiple orgasms, and start a family.

Fifty Shades explores a BDSM relationship between two fictional characters. With the publication of *Fifty Shades of Grey*, BDSM has

become a staple of the erotic romance subgenre. BDSM refers to a variety of consensual and desired practices involving power, domination, subordination, humiliation, the infliction or reception of pain or injury for pleasure through, but not limited to, caning, spanking, whipping, blindfolding, flogging, or restraining (Weiss). BDSM practices have never been acceptable, above all, among the most conservative strata of society because, according to them, they are not ethically and morally correct, even when these activities are consensual and safe. “BDSM has been historically labelled as being deviant and this label has still not fully disappeared” (Drdová and Saxonberg 1002). Most feminists contend that, through these BDSM activities, both the books and the film adaptations promote the idea of “a perceived normalization and naturalization of violence against women” (Larabee 223). Ultimately, they assert that Anastasia experiences gender-based violence. The Istanbul Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence, as the benchmark for international legislation to address gender-based violence, defines gender-based violence and violence against women (two terms that are often used interchangeably), as a gender act that

is understood as a violation of human rights and a form of discrimination against women and shall mean all acts of gender-based violence that result in, or are likely to result in, physical, sexual, psychological or economic harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life. (Council of Europe 3)

This definition will be used to frame the analysis in the next section. In any event, feminism is not a monolith; while many feminists state that *Fifty Shades* portrays violence against women and therefore Anastasia is a battered woman, others argue against this stance and praise the fiction series for promoting female sexual liberation and empowerment. Even James herself has expressed her view in this regard:

“Who is interested, as a woman, in reading about abuse? Why have these books taken off if they are about abuse? Domestic violence, rape, are unacceptable. They are not entertaining in any way. Let me be absolutely clear. Everything that happens in this book is safe and consensual . . . What do I need to do to convince people?” (Steinkellner)

As Lucie Drdová and Steven Saxonberg put it, “Ana is portrayed as a person with no ‘sexual agency,’ no ideas or desires of her own, and she appears to be passively receptive to the male” (989–90). Their statements are mainly grounded in the contention that Anastasia is a shy, weak, vulnerable, submissive, and sexually inexperienced young woman who consents to be dominated, controlled, and cruelly punished by a wealthy, powerful, secretive, selfish, abusive, and sadistic man. An example of this perception is demonstrated in a study by Beatriz Inzunza-Acedo in which the survey responses by participants, who had seen *Fifty Shades of Grey* movie, showed similar views about Christian Grey’s and Anastasia Steele’s behavior:

- 83.3% said [*sic*] that he’s more aggressive/violent than tender or sweet with Anastasia Steele
- 73% think that he’s a cold person, versus the option of saying he has a romantic personality
- 72.6% feel he’s psychologically or physically sick
- 67.1% perceive him as an antisocial man
- 59.5% consider that he’s a disrespectful man
- And [*sic*] 65% of the participants said [*sic*] he’s very confident and with a [*sic*] high self-esteem (44, bullet points in original)
- 76.5% believe she has a weak, submissive character
- 73.5% think she has a [*sic*]very low or none [*sic*] self-esteem
- 60.1% perceive her as a dependant [*sic*] person (instead of independent emotionally and/or economically)
- 56.4% described [*sic*] her as dumb instead of smart
- 50.2% indicated [*sic*] that she has no values
- The only positive characteristic was that 67.9% believe that she has no economic [*sic*] interest in Christian, in other words, she’s not a *gold digger* (45, bullet points and italics in original)

Personality traits should not be interpreted to mean that Christian is an abuser or that Ana experiences abuse. One can be antisocial or have mental health issues such as depression, obsessive-compulsive disorder or post-traumatic stress disorder and not be an abuser. If personality traits or mental health conditions were the cause of abuse, then abusive men would physically or emotionally abuse other people, including relatives, friends, or colleagues, not only their female partners (Bancroft 23–48).

The fact that the film adaptations were centered on commercial issues and merchandising strategies has probably contributed to spreading, especially through word of mouth, such strenuous allegations of violence and sexual abuse in *Fifty Shades*. They have distorted or altered the real message and essence of the literary work and, consequently, the authentic roles of Christian Grey and Anastasia Steele. Due to this moral outrage, there were complaints about the way BDSM is dealt with in the story “as being not a sexual proclivity, but an act of abuse” (Steinkellner). Even some practitioners have pointed out that BDSM practices and relationships reflected in *Fifty Shades* are not realistic and therefore inaccurate: “*Fifty Shades* portrays BDSM in a manner that aims to repulse the readers rather than make them understand how BDSM is practiced in reality” (Drdová and Saxonberg 1002). In part, their complaints are based on the fact that the set of rules and the issue of consent are not sufficiently clear. Anastasia never actually signs the BDSM contract, and she is free to renegotiate rules and boundaries at any time. She agrees to a trial period in which sexual encounters with Christian are consensual, as will be argued in the next section.

What is more, some members of the BDSM community disagree with *Fifty Shades* because the portrayals of BDSM practitioners (Christian, Elena, Leila) suggest that they are mentally damaged and in need of psychiatric professional help, thus implying that BDSM practitioners engage in such practices due to a mental disorder. Historically, BDSM practices have been pathologized and stigmatized as proof that practitioners suffered from psychological disorders or were damaged by traumatic pasts. However, the most recent scientific studies have concluded that there is no obvious connection between psychological disorders or trauma and BDSM. Indeed, in the Nordic countries it is no longer considered a psychiatric disease. Besides, “sexual sadism” and “sexual masochism” are not recognized as psychopathological paraphilias in the fifth edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (American Psychiatric Association, qtd. in Weiss). This is also

evinced in *Fifty Shades Darker* (James) when Dr. Flynn, Christian's psychiatrist, explains to Anastasia that "sadist" is "no longer recognized as a psychiatric term . . . It's not even classified as a paraphilia anymore" (412). He also clarifies that "sexual sadism . . . [is] . . . not a disease; it's a lifestyle choice . . . practiced in a safe, sane relationship between consenting adults" (413).

In addition to the harsh criticism of the film adaptations, the *Fifty Shades* series of novels and, most specifically, "the quality of the prose has been severely disparaged by critics" (Van Reenen 226). Comparisons between the novels and the films are frequent. "People who had read the novels before were dissatisfied with the adaptation of the book to the movie because they believed it was less erotic and romantic than the original story" (Inzunza-Acedo 44). The novels and films were defined, among other terms, as "mommy porn" (Inzunza-Acedo 44). *Fifty Shades* is an erotic romance novel that does not primarily aim at the sexual stimulation of its readers. It focuses on the plot, the protagonists, their personalities, their emotional bond, their respective developments, and a happy ending. These elements are not essential in pornography where depictions are reduced to sexual organs and plots "are designed to sexually arouse the reader and nothing else" (Sylvia Day, qtd. in McAlister 214).

Moreover, the first installment, *Fifty Shades of Grey*, and its film adaptation have also been accused of glorifying, glamorizing, and even romanticizing violence against women (Casey; Dines; O'Clare; Smith). Likewise, in their research into *Fifty Shades of Grey*, Amy Bonomi et al. identified "abuse patterns" and found that Anastasia "suffers reactions typical of abused women" (742). Following this line, Claire Philipson, director of Wearside Women in Need, a charity aiding victims of domestic abuse, called *Fifty Shades of Grey* "an instruction manual for an abusive individual to sexually torture a vulnerable young woman" (Inzunza-Acedo 37). As a result, several campaigns and boycotts were organized to stop the sales of the book and the release of the film. For instance, the National Center on Sexual Exploitation "launched an online campaign to take donations for battered women and urged a boycott of the movie's opening weekend. It told readers what message to take from it: 'It is really about sexual abuse and violence against women' (Dawn Hawkins, qtd. in Smith)" (Larabee 223).

There were more examples such as the feminist Radical Alliance for Women which protested "outside movie theatres . . . and distributed Valentine's Day cards with information about domestic violence and abuse

. . . promoting the idea of ‘fifty dollars not *Fifty Shades*’ requesting that ticket money went to women’s shelters instead of movie tickets” (Steinkellner). Furthermore, the book was even banned from some Florida libraries, for example in Brevard County, and from other US libraries for being too pornographic, according to local librarians (Flood). On the one hand, Dawn Hawkins, executive director of National Center on Sexual Exploitation stated: “The porn industry has poised men and women to receive the message that sexual violence is enjoyable” (Smith). On the other hand, Amy Bonomi et al. criticized the stance of the librarians for banning the books due to “semi-pornographic content” rather than abuse:

our analysis shows perpetuation of abuse in one of the Western world’s most popular novels . . . Concerning is that the banning of *Fifty Shades* in public libraries is linked to issues of semi-pornographic content, rather than to the underlying pervasive abuse patterns we documented . . . This suggests, in part, a continued underlying societal tolerance of abuse. (742)

The fact that some librarians see pornography and not abuse in the books does not mean that society continues to tolerate gender-based violence. The librarians’ position is as respectable as that of those who argue that *Fifty Shades* is abuse and those who defend that it is a self-help manual to improve sexual relationships or a tool for social empowerment and sexual liberation.

On the conservative, moralist, and Christian side, it is worth mentioning the Roman Catholic archbishop of Cincinnati, Dennis Schnurr, who claimed that “a young Miss Steele is urged to sign a contract becoming a sex slave and agreeing to an abusive and degrading relationship.” He affirmed that *Fifty Shades of Grey* “is in direct contrast to the Christian message of God’s design for self-giving and self-sacrificing love, marriage and sexual intimacy.” Consequently, he declared it “a direct assault on Christian marriage and on the moral and spiritual strength of God’s people” (Wyatt). Having sex outside of marriage for pleasure without reproductive purposes as well as engaging in sexual activities like BDSM is frowned upon by the Church. Women’s lives and behavior have been under constant scrutiny and have received countless strictures from various sectors of society, including conservative Christian circles. These norms have influenced women by imposing roles and expectations on them that have shaped their public perception.

3. A THOROUGH ANALYSIS OF ANASTASIA'S ROLE AS AN EMPOWERED WOMAN

Female empowerment has increased in popularity as never before, especially since the “Me Too” movement in 2017, which represented a breakthrough. For the first time, women joined together to raise their voices to publicly denounce sexual abuse and harassment, and at the same time, it encouraged and empowered younger and more vulnerable women to do the same, making them feel that they were no longer alone. Female empowerment implies women’s capability to make and determine their own decisions, choices, and goals in all aspects of their lives, whether in society, education, work, or others. In other words, an empowered woman fights for her rights, freedom, opportunities, and emotional and economic independence. This is precisely what Anastasia Steele does throughout the novels. For example, Anastasia faces situations of sexual harassment by her boss, Jack Hyde, (James, *Fifty Shades Darker* 369–70) and by a man who touches her hips and behind while she is dancing on a dance floor at a nightclub in Aspen (James, *Fifty Shades Freed* 303). In both scenes, she fights back by hitting them demonstrating that she is an empowered woman who is not afraid of sexual harassers. More importantly, she feels empowered when Christian is near her: “I pull his lips to mine tasting his surprise as I push my tongue into his mouth. I am standing on the step above him—we’re at the same level, and *I feel euphorically empowered*” (James, *Fifty Shades Darker* 386, emphasis added).

According to Smith et al., disempowerment is “women's routine existence and the loss of power that occurs with sustained battering as their thoughts and behaviors become habitually modified in accordance with the batterers’ desires” (176). These scholars consider disempowerment typical of battered women. As such, the definition of this concept would mean that “battered” and “empowered” are incompatible terms. In fact, women who have been battered, once they are able to leave abuse behind, must be provided with the appropriate tools and resources to empower themselves. If Anastasia were a battered woman and Christian, a batterer, she would feel disempowered because her thoughts and behavior would be routinely altered according to Christian’s wishes. But Anastasia feels happy, comfortable, and alive with him: “I have never felt as alive as I do now. It’s a thrill to be sitting here beside him” (James, *Fifty Shades of Grey* 355). There appears to be no evidence of gender-based violence (Council of Europe 3).

When having sex, Christian asks Ana questions such as “You okay?"/ “More?"/ “Again?"/ “Did I hurt you?"/ “Seriously, are you okay?” (James, *Fifty Shades of Grey* 117–18), “How does that feel?” (James, *Fifty Shades of Grey* 321) to assess Ana’s positive reaction to her sexual experience, thus showing that he is an attentive, respectful, and caring man, concerned about Ana’s well-being, not an abuser. In addition, there are scenes in which Anastasia is drunk and Christian does not engage in sexual activities with her (James, *Fifty Shades of Grey* 66, *Fifty Shades Freed* 310). Similarly, there is a scene where Christian is drunk and wants to have sex with Anastasia, but she also sets boundaries related to consent and alcohol by telling him that he is drunk and needs some sleep, and he respects her decision not to have sex (James, *Fifty Shades Freed* 422–23). In all these scenes Christian’s behavior does not seem to exhibit signs of sexual harm or coercion towards Ana (Council of Europe 3).

Anastasia knows exactly what she wants and how she feels. She rejects two suitors: Paul Clayton, her boss’s brother, and her friend José Rodríguez, even knowing that with them she would have a more “regular” relationship than with Christian: “Grey is only interested in a dominant/submissive relationship . . . Steele just wants a regular boyfriend” (Williams). However, Anastasia has no feelings of love for them. She is sexually inexperienced, that is, she is a virgin and for the first time in her life, she wants to have sex with a man and “feel his hands and his mouth on [her]” (James, *Fifty Shades of Grey* 69). That man is Christian Grey not Paul or José. Thus, she chooses Christian over them, and they make love because it is Anastasia’s choice and decision. Moreover, Christian asks her if she wants to make love to him and she accepts (James, *Fifty Shades of Grey* 110–11). This is an example of explicit consent. She loses her virginity because it is her body, her choice and this is what she also says to Christian:

“I don’t think you robbed me,” I mutter haughtily—*I am not a helpless maiden*. “I think my virtue was offered up pretty freely and willingly. I wanted you too, and if I remembered correctly, I rather enjoyed myself.” I smile shyly at him, biting my lip. (James, *Fifty Shades Darker* 200, italics in original)

By telling Christian she enjoyed her first sexual experience with him in a positive way, she is showing a high level of sexual communication. Anastasia does not appear to exhibit traits of “physical, sexual or

psychological harm or suffering . . . , including threats of such acts or coercion” (Council of Europe 3).

Christian proposes a BDSM relationship to Anastasia where he is the dominant and she is the submissive. After thinking it over, she agrees to a trial period of engaging in a submissive role. That means that he will have control over Ana’s health, exercise, sexual activity, and food. But Anastasia never signs the BDSM contract. The only contract she signs is a nondisclosure agreement (NDA) which means she cannot disclose anything about them and their relationship to anyone (James, *Fifty Shades of Grey* 96) and she signs it voluntarily. Anastasia does not sign the BDSM contract because she wants to establish her limits and negotiate the contract on her own terms at any time (James, *Fifty Shades of Grey* 105–08; 216–26; 254–60). For instance, she decides to exercise three times a week, and not four, as Christian wishes (James, *Fifty Shades of Grey* 107). Regarding food, she says: “No one is going to dictate to me what I eat” (James, *Fifty Shades of Grey* 222). In doing so, Christian himself recognizes she is a good negotiator and offers her a job in his company, but she rejects it (James, *Fifty Shades of Grey* 107); Anastasia does not want to be professionally dependent on Christian. She is determined to pursue her dream of becoming an editor. In fact, she has interviews for internships at two publishing houses. Finally, she gets a job at one of them, Seattle Independent Publishing and, starts a new career as assistant to the editor Jack Hyde (James, *Fifty Shades of Grey*). Besides, Christian encourages Anastasia to take time to research, ask questions or talk to one of his former submissives to clarify doubts about the BDSM lifestyle (198). Anastasia rejects the last option; she does not want to talk to any of his former partners. As shown, Anastasia sets boundaries around Christian. At the same time, her behavior manifests traits of empowerment.

According to Matilda Swinney, “*Fifty Shades* is the same story as *Beauty and the Beast* . . . innocent girl falls for troubled man, endures his anti-social behavior out of belief in his ultimate goodness, and eventually teaches him to be a sociable, polite member of society.” Anastasia is determined to drag Christian into the light. She wants to show him that another kind of relationship based on love not submission is possible, especially when Christian confesses to her that one of his mother’s friends, Elena Lincoln, had seduced him when he was fifteen years old. Elena brought him into a BDSM relationship as her submissive for six years (James, *Fifty Shades of Grey* 154). After this confession, Anastasia feels repulsed by Elena. At Christian’s birthday party, after Christian proposes

marriage to Anastasia, she does not hesitate to call her “sick child molester” (James, *Fifty Shades Darker* 521) for having abused a minor. Additionally, Anastasia plucks up the courage to defend and protect her relationship with Christian from Elena’s interference (James, *Fifty Shades Darker*). In this scene, Anastasia displays characteristics of an empowered woman confronting a pedophile for physically and sexually abusing a 15-year-old minor. In turn, by protecting and defending her relationship with Christian, she does not seem to act like an abused woman.

Anastasia wishes to express her love for Christian by touching him and that is the reason why she consents to him punishing her with a belt. Christian hits Anastasia but it is all consensual; it is her choice, her decision. Nevertheless, this ordeal turns out to be a “wake-up call” for her (James, *Fifty Shades of Grey* 507). Anastasia finds out that she does not want him to hit her like that again. At the same time, she realizes that Christian has needs she cannot fulfill. She feels they are incompatible, and she leaves Christian (even though he wants her to stay) but not without confessing to him that she has fallen in love. Following this confession, Christian is horrified because nobody has told him they love him before, and he feels that he does not deserve to be loved (James, *Fifty Shades of Grey*).

After a brief breakup, Anastasia and Christian understand that they cannot be apart. They miss each other and Christian uses the occasion of José’s show to see Anastasia again and makes a new suggestion. He realizes that, despite his BDSM lifestyle, he needs Anastasia more. Anastasia accepts Christian’s proposal but, this time, on her own terms, that is, without punishments and rules. In other words, Christian and Anastasia reconcile their differences:

“Ana, believe me. After I punished you and you left me, my worldview changed. I wasn’t joking when I said I would avoid ever feeling like that again.” He gazes at me with pained entreaty. When you said you loved me, it was a revelation. No one’s ever said it to me before, and it was as if I’d laid something to rest—or maybe you’d laid it to rest, I don’t know. Dr. Flynn and I are still in deep discussion about it” / “The thought of hurting you . . . in any real way . . . it’s abhorrent to me” / “If you wanted to do that, then fine . . . but you don’t and I get it. I can’t do all that shit with you if you don’t want to. I told you once before, you have all the power. And now, since you came back, I don’t feel that compulsion at all.” (James, *Fifty Shades Darker* 330)

When Anastasia asks Christian to “show [her] how much it can hurt”, Christian asks her: “You would try?” and she replies: “Yes. I said I would try” (James, *Fifty Shades of Grey* 504). As observed, Anastasia and Christian are two willing adult participants who are going to participate in a BDSM activity. Consensual BDSM requires limits, rules, and mutual respect. Ana sets and resets her boundaries and Christian takes them into consideration. By contrast, Christian’s relationship with Elena probably lacked consent, as he was a minor. Their relationship was not legal; she physically and sexually abused Christian. However, Anastasia and Christian are both adults and capable of giving consent. After this experience, Anastasia chooses to leave and end the relationship, not because she might feel physically abused, but because she realizes that she cannot satisfy Christian’s needs, that is, more extreme BDSM activities, and neither can he satisfy hers (James, *Fifty Shades of Grey*). She just understands they are incompatible. Elena, however, was physically and emotionally abused by her husband who, in addition to being controlling (James, *Fifty Shades Darker*), “beat her to a pulp. He broke her jaw, her left arm and four of her ribs” because she was having sexual relations with Christian (James, *Fifty Shades Freed* 522). This episode evinces a clear example of abuse.

But, what about the episode between Anastasia and Christian based on mutual consent? Would the law consider it a case of abuse? As Margot Weiss specifies, “the legality of BDSM varies internationally and is often a gray area.” She explains that in countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom or Canada, consent is not a legal option for defense if assault is involved. Hence, it will hinge on whether the courts see a specific BDSM activity as a form of assault or not (5). However, in the Netherlands, Germany, Scandinavia, and Japan, BDSM activities are legal if they are practiced with the mutual consent of the practitioners involved. In other countries, legality depends on the interpretation of the legal code by the judges. Thus, considering that the BDSM activity carried out by Anastasia and Christian takes place in the United States, if it were to be judged, their consent would not be valid, and we would have to wait for the sentence. The question of whether there was assault or not would have to be settled. On the other hand, if, for example, it had happened in Germany, it would have been legal. Finally, if it had occurred in Italy, it would have depended on the decision of a judge according to his or her interpretation of the legal code.

James herself has explained that *Fifty Shades* depicts a love story whose main characters have sexual encounters which are safe and consensual (“*Fifty Shades of Grey*”). All sexual relationships must be consensual with or without BDSM activities. Anastasia and Christian practice the BDSM lifestyle within a context of mutual respect and pleasure, a game in which he plays the role of the dominant and she plays the role of the submissive. Anastasia is not forced to engage with this lifestyle by Christian. On the contrary, Anastasia acquiesces to BDSM activities, but on her own terms:

The book actually keeps its female protagonist in charge of everything that happens in the bedroom. She has the power. The couple in *50 Shades* only pretends to be slave and master. Anastasia is actually the one setting the rules (she renegotiates the sex contract on just about every page) and Christian accedes to all her wishes. (Elaine Liner, qtd. in Illouz 56)

Indeed, when Christian makes Anastasia a new proposition, she also renegotiates it. She refuses whips, canes, belts, punishments, and rules (James, *Fifty Shades Darker* 33–36). In this way, the initial proposal is renewed with a softer version of the BDSM lifestyle based on Anastasia’s preferences and desires: “a regular vanilla relationship with kinky fuckery” (James, *Fifty Shades Darker* 34). As shown, Christian is patient and understanding with Ana, not abusive. He does not mind when Anastasia takes control of everything (James, *Fifty Shades Freed*) and gains power within the relationship.

As mentioned earlier, Anastasia never signs the contract. Nor does she self-identify as a submissive. Christian wants Anastasia to stay with him and not go to work, especially in order to protect her from Leila Williams, who is suffering a psychotic breakdown and is armed and following Christian. However, Anastasia does not obey him and refuses to stay at home without working. She “fights tooth and nail for her autonomy” (Illouz 45). Her work is of vital importance, and she does not want to be financially dependent on Christian or any other man. After discussing the situation with Christian, she finally achieves her goal, that is, she goes to work although it entails having a security detail (James, *Fifty Shades Darker*). A similar situation occurs when Christian is in New York and Ana goes out for a drink with her friend Kate. Christian wants Ana and Kate to stay in the apartment because Jack Hyde is still out there (James, *Fifty Shades Freed*). Christian gets angry at Ana for not obeying him and

Anastasia reminds him of one of her wedding vows: “I never promised to obey you, Christian” / “Deal with it please. For both our sakes” (James, *Fifty Shades Freed* 251). Anastasia understands that Christian is just being protective in a very dangerous situation. But, as she has acknowledged from the beginning of the story, she “doesn’t have a submissive bone in [her] body” (James, *Fifty Shades of Grey* 226). That is the reason why Anastasia does not include obedience in her wedding vows. This causes arguments between Christian and her. Anastasia is even determined to leave him if he insists on her changing her vows to include obedience. She is not prepared to make a vow she might break. Anastasia’s decision causes him to suffer a nightmare. When he wakes, he says:

“The vows. No obeying. I can do that. We’ll find a way.” The words rush out of his mouth in a tumble of emotion and confusion and anxiety. / “Yes. We will. We’ll always find a way,” she whispers, and her lips are on his, silencing him, bringing him back to the now. (James, *Fifty Shades Freed* 4)

Again, Anastasia sets boundaries and shows traits of empowerment. Christian is understanding and willing to find a way for them to work out their differences without hurting each other. Anastasia and Christian show a high level of communication, which is positive for a long-lasting relationship. In addition, these examples suggest that there is no violence or abuse (Council of Europe 3).

As a result of the sexual harassment and blackmail suffered by Anastasia, Jack is fired and Anastasia is promoted, becoming acting editor (James, *Fifty Shades Darker* 400–02). Because of this unexpected situation, Jack decides to take revenge committing a series of criminal acts: he sabotages Christian’s helicopter, sets fire to Christian’s office, and tries to kidnap Anastasia. Fortunately, Ryan, one of Christian’s security men, catches him and Hyde is “charged with attempted kidnapping and arson” (James, *Fifty Shades Freed* 327). Nevertheless, when Jack Hyde is released on bail, he commits another crime. This time he kidnaps Mia, Christian’s sister, and wants five million dollars. He phones Anastasia, who is in her workplace, to inform her and she has to deal with the situation on her own (James, *Fifty Shades Freed* 445). Anastasia has two hours to get the money and she cannot tell the police, Christian or his security team. If she does, Jack will rape and kill Mia.

Once Ana gets the money and meets Jack, he hits her, but she gathers the strength to shoot Jack in the leg (James, *Fifty Shades Freed* 459–60).

Ana saves Mia and her father-in-law, Carrick, thanks her for risking her own life to save his daughter (James, *Fifty Shades Freed* 477). By performing this feat, Anastasia shows that she is an empowered woman capable of risking her life to help and save others. Many critics have highlighted Christian's stalker-like behavior. According to them, Christian monitors Ana's whereabouts using devices such as GPS and phones that he purchases for her. However, as Christian is a billionaire and needs protection, he has hired security men for that very reason. It is natural that he buys these devices for his own and Anastasia's safety to prevent serious situations such as kidnapping. Undoubtedly it was thanks to the GPS and phones, Christian was able to find the whereabouts of Mia and Anastasia to call the ambulance and the police (James, *Fifty Shades Freed* 460).

When Anastasia discovers she is pregnant and tells Christian, his reaction is far from ideal: he is really angry and leaves home to get drunk (James, *Fifty Shades Freed* 418–19). Christian feels that it is not the right time and that he will not be a good father. In light of Christian's behavior, Ana decides to choose her baby over him if he does not change his attitude:

“Well, you were right. I do choose this defenseless baby over you. That's what any loving parent does. That's what your mother should have done for you. And I am sorry that she didn't—because we wouldn't be having this conversation right now if she had. But you're an adult now—you need to grow up and smell the fucking coffee and stop behaving like a petulant adolescent.” / “You may not be happy about this baby. I'm not ecstatic, given the timing and your less-than-lukewarm reception to this new life, this flesh of your flesh. But you can either do this with me, or I'll do it on my own. The decision is yours” (James, *Fifty Shades Freed* 434–35)

This scene clearly exemplifies the spirit of an empowered woman. She argues with Christian, raises her voice, and strongly disagrees with his attitude. Anastasia is not afraid or threatened by Christian. Now she is pregnant, and her priorities have changed. She is willing to care for the baby on her own if necessary.

The *Fifty Shades* love story ends up revealing that Anastasia does not give up but grows in the face of adversity. Indeed, due to her desire to have another child and despite the difficulties when giving birth to her first (James, *Fifty Shades Freed* 444–46), Anastasia gets pregnant again with a baby girl. Similarly, despite Christian's economic status and financial help, Anastasia achieves her dreams of becoming an editor and running

her own company, Grey Publishing, which is very successful and “makes money”, by using her own intelligence, effort, and determination:

“Grey Publishing has an author on the *New York Times* best-sellers [*sic*] list—Boyce Fox’s sales are phenomenal, the e-book side of our business has exploded, and I finally have the team I want around me.” / “And you’re making money in these difficult times,” Christian adds, his voice reflecting his pride. (James, *Fifty Shades Freed* 541)

By praising her success, Christian is supportive of Ana, not violent towards her. In addition, Christian wants Anastasia to succeed and, therefore, he does not hesitate to help her financially as Elena did with him; she had lent him “a hundred grand to start his business” (James, *Fifty Shades Darker* 109). Moreover, when they marry, they do so in community property; Christian has always wanted to share all his wealth with Anastasia: lavish gifts, goods, assets, and bank accounts (James, *Fifty Shades Darker* 380). That is the reason why he does not want her to sign a prenuptial agreement (James, *Fifty Shades Freed*). Christian wants Anastasia to be financially independent and successful like him. These instances seem to indicate that there is no sign of “economic harm or suffering” (Council of Europe 3). The books contain a wide range of examples which demonstrate that Anastasia is not a victim of gender-based violence, thus leaving open the way for further analysis of Anastasia’s role as an empowered woman.

CONCLUSIONS

Unfortunately, gender-based violence is still present in 21st century society. *Fifty Shades* by E. L. James has been accused of encouraging it by emulating violent and aggressive patterns within a romantic love story between two fictional characters, Anastasia and Christian. Anastasia’s participation in BDSM activities and the controversial assumption that BDSM is about abuse have probably contributed to her being typecast as a battered woman. Nonetheless, through the analysis of Anastasia’s role, it has been evinced that she does not fit the Istanbul Convention’s definition of gender-based violence.

The aim of this article has been to express a different viewpoint on *Fifty Shades* where BDSM, surprising as it might seem, becomes the scaffolding on which Anastasia and Christian build, consolidate, and strengthen their loving relationship while Anastasia emerges as an

empowered woman who questions the patriarchal discourse of femininity associated with obedience. Anastasia does not lose her power to Christian but gains it throughout the novels. She exhibits her firm willingness to set and reset boundaries. She does not succumb to Christian's BDSM proposal; she does not indulge his desire to become his submissive. She negotiates and renegotiates the rules, thus drawing the lines around her comfort zone and preferences. Anastasia does not conform or submit to Christian's desires and preferences. Rather, it is the other way around; Anastasia changes Christian's thoughts and behavior to suit her own wishes and he compliantly accepts. Further research on this series of novels might be helpful to confirm this thesis, using tenets taken from other disciplines, including Psychiatry and Psychology and also linguistic perspectives, such as those offered by Sociolinguistics (with its focus on language and gender), Conversation Analysis and Discourse Analysis.

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