

## UNBUCKLING THE SHACKLES: A SEX-POSITIVE FEMINIST DEFENSE OF BDSM

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*It is not enough to simply claim that one has every right to do whatever they desire to do because there is always the possibility of false empowerment. Through the presence of BDSM in mass media, it has caught enough attention for it to elicit influence and uneducated inclusion to their lifestyle. I attempt to revive the debate between the abolitionist versus the sex-positive because there is a necessity to provide a critical analysis of BDSM today in the age of post-sex revolution. Despite of the backlash it received from the thinkers from different walks of field, it is an empowering act because there is mutual respect, condemnation of abuse, and recognition of one's individuality despite of its coercive, violent, and possessive act.*

### INTRODUCTION

Since the publication of EL James's undeniably popular<sup>1</sup> *Fifty Shades* trilogy about seven years ago, BDSM (Bondage and Discipline, Dominance and submission, Sadism and Masochism) has constantly been in the lime light. Articles have been written to scrutinize the Fiction, extending the criticisms up to the practice itself. Questions and concerns about its morality and its permissibility have been raised. It has been subjected to backlash from the conservative viewpoint, however, it has also been equally defended by the BDSM community; drawing the line between the responsible practice of BDSM, and the misrepresentation in the Trilogy and in its Film series adaptation (Kravitz 2018).

Although BDSM has garnered its prominence just recently and although the term is relatively young,<sup>2</sup> the practices of BDSM date back to the Sargonic dynasty (Nomis 2013, iii-iv). During that Age, Sumerians worshipped and venerated Inanna for she was antiquity's "Queen of Heaven." She was the goddess of sex and had a reputation for being the goddess of power and domination. Pieces of ancient art that have been excavated so far depicted the Goddess with bows and arrows hanging on her back<sup>3</sup> or with a sacred rod in one hand and a reel on the other<sup>4</sup>. Although no piece has shown Inanna clearly holding a whip yet, a tool she used in her sacred dance, which is referred to in ancient texts as a *keppû*, continues to baffle scholars. Early scholars thought it was a skipping rope, but it turned out that it is an image of Inanna raising the hem of her skirt. However, despite of the different interpretations of what a *keppû* actually is, they have come up with a sound hypothesis: this tool displays domination. Inanna is known to have asserted domination over men, mountains,

and even gods. Whether this was her using her sexuality to manipulate them to bow down to her or this was an actual tangible tool, it seemed to have worked in the same way.

Unfortunately, broken parts of the cuneiform tablet where *Hymns to Inanna* were written are still missing, however much of the recovered pieces can already give a huge glimpse of Inanna's sexual domination.

Those who do not respect her suspended net do not escape... when she suspends the meshes of her net. The man she has called by name she does not hold in esteem. Having approached the woman, she breaks the weapon and gives her a spear. The male *gišgisagkeš*, the *nisub* and the female *gišgi* officiants, after having... punishment, moaning... The ecstatic, the transformed *pilipili*, *kurgara* and *sagursag* priests... Lament and song... They exhaust themselves with weeping and grief, they... laments (Enheduanna 2006, 95).

Inanna's domination, as pictured by Enheduanna, was filled with suffering and euphoria, it's as if they were under trance – "... punishment, moaning... The ecstatic..." – these are partly what the modern-day BDSM is about; it is partly about that "cathartic release."

The concept of domination is often represented by a whip. But why exactly are whips considered a sign of such? According to Nomis (2013, 13), whips, floggers, and flails were patterned after the agricultural flail and animal whip, which shows dominance over them. For instance, Min, the ancient Egyptian god of fertility, is pictured as a male holding his erect penis in one hand and a flail in the other. Another example is the *diamastigosis* ritual performed on *epebes*, young men, where they were flagellated in the name of Artemis Orthia, the Greek goddess of fertility and salvation. These accounts of flagellation ceremonies were accounts not of non-sense sadism but of sanctity.

The essence of sexual domination and sadism in the ancient history extended up to the 17<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> century, but this time, away from the religious and spiritual setting. England's contemporary BDSM dungeons used to be flagellation establishments ran by 'Whipstresses,' 'Birch Disciplinarians,' and 'Governesses' (Nomis 2013, 22). This kind of business boomed because of the high demand for sexually vicious women, who were highly skilled and theoretically knowledgeable. Men's desire for a dominatrix was fueled by pieces of art that have portrayed men on their knees adoring women<sup>5</sup>. These images sparked the urge for a more dynamic power exchange between the binary sexes and for challenging the established system of gender roles.

It was only in the 20<sup>th</sup> century that the term "BDSM" has been used. As Nomis (2013, 14-16) further elaborated, the modern-day BDSM community would see much resemblance with Inanna's ancient rituals – transformation into different gender roles, imposition of commandments and punishments, infliction of pain, manipulation of emotions, and transportation to altered states. The practice of transforming males into women and females into men were not mere mythological ideas. They were, in fact, actual practices to celebrate the ambiguity and fluidity of gender identities. Such practice is still observed today in a different platform. In BDSM, there are practices that play and push the boundaries of the different gender roles such as sissy-training and femdom. The BDSM community prides themselves for the fact that they embrace all gender identities.

BDSM is a complex term joined by Bondage and Discipline (B/D), Dominance and submission (D/s), and Sadism and Masochism (commonly joined to sadomasochism; S/M). B/D, unlike the other two that assigns the roles, refers to the kind of activities that involve restraining. Bondage is the practice of restraining physically using devices such as but not limited to harness, cuffs, and rope. On the other hand, discipline is the practice of restraining psychologically using rules, commandments, and punishments.

D/s - with a capital “D” and a small letter “s” to emphasize the authority - refers to the roles being assumed. The Bottom (submissive) surrenders to the Top (dominant) but is given a set of safe words to prevent the Top from overstepping their physical or psychological parameter<sup>6</sup>. Fantasy role plays may be an element of D/s with partners taking authoritative or obedient roles such as teacher and student, boss and secretary, and master and slave. The idea is that those who assume the role of the Bottom enjoy the idea of someone else being in control perhaps because it gives them a flow of adrenaline rush, while those who assume the role of the Top enjoy the idea of being in control.

Lastly, S/M refers to the practice of seeking pleasure from inflicting or receiving pain. The terms “sadism” and “masochism” came from the name of two authors - Marquis de Sade and Leopold von Sacher-Masoch. In 1785, de Sade wrote the infamous *The 120 Days of Sodom* (1904) while he was in prison in Bastille (Prrottet, 2015). He sneaked in pieces of paper then glued them together, forming a 39-foot scroll. This is where the original manuscript was written. He carefully hid the scroll in the wall of his cell, which, luckily, was found by Arnoux de Saint-Maximin two days before Bastille was blazed by the revolutionaries. Heartbroken, de Sade died in 1814 thinking that his work was forever gone. In 1789, the original manuscript was lost for the first time. It emerged only in 1904 in Berlin where it was first published. It went through a lot of adventures – it was kept in a drawer, was smuggled to Switzerland, and was even fought over in court. After all of its adventures, or misadventures for that matter, it was returned to France only in 2014 when Gérard Lhéritier put it up on display in his Musée des Lettres et Manuscrits (Willsher 2014). In 2017, the French government declared de Sade’s highly controversial original scroll a National Treasure.

The misadventures it went through did not cause its infamy but what was written on that scroll did. The reason for de Sade’s imprisonment resembles the plot of his work. *The 120 Days of Sodom* voyeurs over the four aristocratic libertine men – a duke, a bishop, a magistrate, and a banker – together with four veteran brothel madams and their specially kidnapped children and teenagers, as they lock themselves away for five months in the secluded Château de Silling high up in the mountain. The brothel madams take turns every month in narrating the tales of the most interesting sexual depravity of their clients, which then is to be enacted on or by their victims together with the aristocratic libertines. As they go about their self-imposed exile, the tale becomes more and more brutal and obscene. One victim after another unwillingly gratifies the barbarous perverted tortures of the ruthless pedophile men. Each month follows a specific “passion” – the simple, the complex, the criminal, and the murderous. And on the fifth month, the surviving victims are disposed.

It was Richard von Krafft-Ebing who coined the term “sadism” in his *Psychopathia Sexualis* (1886), and so does “masochism.” Unlike de Sade, Sacher-Masoch was very much alive when Krafft-Ebing used his name to describe the love and enjoyment of being in pain and humiliated (Blincoe 2014). He was a social reformer fighting for the rights of the Jews and of women through a magazine to which he was the editor. Perhaps, part of his so-called

“quest for the emancipation of women” was his desire for sexual female domination.

He professed his fascination for vicious women in his *Venus in Furs* (1870). The Narrator dreams of Venus in fur lecturing him about how a merciless woman satisfies a lustful man’s hunger. The Narrator then meets up with Severin von Kusiemski and sees a painting of Venus in similar clothing. Severin then shows the narrator his manuscript of *Confessions of a Suprasensual Man*. A story within a story, it unfolds how Severin’s obsessive admiration for Wanda von Dunajew leads him to beg her to be her slave. Wanda hesitantly accepts his plea, not understanding what lies underneath his request. However, as she gives in, she feels pushed towards but at the same time pulled away from his odd plea. She realizes how intriguing it is to turn into an unsympathetic and stone-hearted queen, and so she ardently jumps into the role play. At the opposite side, she finds it sickening and scorns Severin for making her do seemingly inhumane acts. Their master-slave relationship comes to an end when, on their way to Florence, Wanda meets Alexis Papadopolis. The cold and cruel queen now wants to submit to Alexis. Severin’s humiliation under Alexis, now Wanda’s master, leads him to reclaim his power from Wanda. Severin and the Narrator end the tale with a note that a woman is only a man’s slave unless she receives the same opportunity to learn through formal education and to work for a living.

Sadomasochism is the most controversial aspect of BDSM for two reasons. First, psychiatrists had considered the practice as a pathological symptom of past abuse or a sexual problem<sup>7</sup>. However, recent research suggests that the practice is simply a sexual interest and that sadomasochists should be considered neither damaged nor dangerous (Richters, et al 2008, 1667). Second, due to the dynamics of BDSM, which power distinction and sexual violence are on the surface, abolitionists claim that it violates women. This idea is amplified by de Sade’s belief that we need to do evil acts in order for us to attain happiness and freedom. He creates the Sadean hero who lives a life of perversion and pleasure (Airaksinen 1995, i).

This paper however, does not intend to focus on the debate of whether or not practicing BDSM is a pathological symptom of a mental disorder. Rather, this paper shall focus on the latter – the empowering feature, or the lack thereof, of BDSM.

It is frequently given a false account of eroticization of violence, which is the prevalent conventional image of BDSM as a subculture promoting meaningless savagery requiring legal and medical intervention (Richardson, Smith and Werndly 2013, 141). However, for the BDSM community<sup>7</sup>, it is a form of sexual expression which includes uncommon and alternative<sup>9</sup> activities. There is then the question of what exactly are sexual activities and how is BDSM considered one? Igor Primoratz (2006, 8-12, 20-25, 33-36, 40-48) presents four theories as to what sex is. Although it is no longer the only view of what sex is or what it is for, for the longest time, the Christian view have held and have greatly influenced the thinking that sex is for mere procreation – God’s commandment to multiply, in the Christian dogma – that may only be done within the blessed confines of the sacrament of matrimony. The second view, although it has not completely detached itself from the Christian idea and has actually influenced the more progressed consciousness of the Church, had its fair share as the jump-off point of viewing sex in the secular and humanistic light. Recognizing humans beyond being “machines” for reproduction, sex is something done out of an emotion called “love.” The third view brought about by further humanistic and existential analysis say that

sex is a body language conveying one's endearment, appreciation, rage, shame, greed, and superiority to name a few of the countless possible emotions a human can experience towards or because of the Other. Finally, the fourth view departs from viewing sex through or for something else. It arrives at the idea to view it as it is and not for something other than what it is, which is something that provides a specific kind of pleasure. This view paves way for kink- and sex-positivity, to which BDSM belongs.

Sexual activities typically include only the normal ones – penetrative, oral, and masturbation. In the portrayal of BDSM in the popular culture, the most common misconception is that it always includes the “normal” activities with the addition of whips and chains. BDSM, however, is not always about that. BDSM includes those that have absolutely nothing to do with genital stimulation like restraining or flagellation (Tisdale 1994, 296), which are considered as kinks because they retreat from what “normal” sex is. It is about the sensual feeling and the altered state of consciousness one gets from the experience whether or not it involves genital stimulation. An example of which is *shibari*, the Japanese art of erotic restraint.

The Japanese had yet again proved how much they value honor and creativity. *Shibari*'s origin dates back to the 15<sup>th</sup> to 17<sup>th</sup> century when *samurais*, as part of their honor as military nobles, had used *hojōjutsu*, the martial art of restraining, to tie their captives with respect, which was shown in the intricate details of the knots and geometric patterns formed (Art of Contemporary Shibari n.d.). Knowing the Japanese culture, it is not a surprise that they had used such way in imprisoning their enemies because ropes and tying have always been a part of their daily lives. *Kimonos*, for instance, consist of several layers connected through ties. Another theory says that there was lack of iron in their country, so peace keepers had used ropes instead of handcuffs (Nawakiri 2017). Although *hojōjutsu* barely survived after the Edo period, during the mid-Meiji period, it evolved into *kinbaku*, the art of erotic bondage, all thanks to its father, Ito Seiu. The fourteen-year old young man then was among the audience of *Nishin Senso – Yuchi no Katak-tan*, First Sino-Japanese War – Tale of Enemy's Night Attack. This story of torture and humiliation done by Chinese soldiers on to Japanese nurses, who eventually forgave them out of noble virtues, paved the way for the emancipation of sexual cruelty. Eventually, the West very much welcomed the art and somewhere in its history, they started calling it *shibari*, which literally translates to “restraint.” Although it is native to the Japanese, it remains a clandestine practice among them (Kok 2016).

*Shibari*, much like BDSM, is not merely about making someone suffer just for “meaningless savagery,” as how I described it earlier through the lens of those who are against it. *Shibari* is about pleasure and endurance (Haruki 2016). *Aibunawa*, or “caressing rope” is about the teasing, pleasure part of it. It is when the rigger<sup>10</sup> paints an illusion of freedom or being in control when in fact their bunnies' hands are tied, loosely yet helplessly. *Semenawa*, or loosely translated to “torture rope,” on the other hand, is about enduring the helplessness because their hands are tightly tied up. It's not necessarily about pain, although that is more often than not part of it, but it is more about enduring the loss of control. It makes them surrender because they are left with no choice.

For Steven James (2015), the simple act of tying someone up is sex with love in itself. By love, he does not mean it in a conventional romantic way, but in a way that he gives his full attention and genuine care to his bunny. James thinks that it is “less about rope but more

about people... It is not just about tying someone up and dominating them or allowing someone to tie you up and dominate you. It's a dance. It's a Tango."<sup>11</sup> It is a form of communication through how the body reacts – through the breaths, the heartbeats, the flushes. Similar to dancing, one listens to their partner's rhythm. They feel the vibrations coming off from them. They eye every movement, from the elaborate ones down to the subtle ones. They need to be in tune with their partner to have a great performance. There has to be harmony between the two of them. It is exactly how it works for James. When he ties his bunny, his responsibility as the rigger is to understand and acknowledge how the embodied soul reacts to the rope as it brushes through their skin and tightens around their flesh.

On the other hand, yes, *shibari* can be sexual, but it is not just a mere sexual act. For Bodhi Zapha (2017), *shibari* is a form of meditation. It is “an out of body experience, of knowing [himself] more than just being a physical body or a monkey mind.”<sup>12</sup> He sees it as a form of healing where it “is opening a door in the mind that takes [his] client and [himself] into a deep meditation – into a space where you feel connected to the sky, to the earth, to your memories.” He further elaborates that, in *shibari*, there is no ego or judgement. This void of “surrender and vulnerability” is a form of “powered surrender.” It strips away the fear of sexuality brought about by taboos, traditions, and beliefs. Sexual energy can arise, but it is not something to be ashamed of. It should be acknowledged that it is generated and is coming from within. It is controlled and can be generated into something else.

Meanwhile, others are hooked to *shibari* for its aesthetic value. Kinoko Hajime (2003) uses “the female body [as] a canvas and the rope [as] a brush.”<sup>13</sup> He sees beauty in distorting, for the lack of a better term, the human figure. There is beauty when flesh bulges between the gaps of the rope, when breasts are oddly emphasized, when compression marks are left on the body, when the patterns of the rope complement its curves. This so-called distortion is far from destructive alteration. This creative distortion is fueled by a high level of appreciation for the complexity and resiliency of the human body. Hajime's love for *shibari* lead him to appreciate not only the human body but also the nature. He went to Aokigahara Forest for a personal project where he applied *shibari* rope techniques to trees and to rocks. At one point, he started feeling a deep connection with them as if he's really part of that larger ecosystem. He even started seeing resemblances of the female curves with the concaves of the trees.

BDSM, in the general and the essential sense, has evolved throughout the known history – from being part of sacred rituals in the ancient time to being an expression of heinous sexual fantasies in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, now it is a radical form of kink practiced in a safe environment. Despite of its evolution into a humane and consensual practice, which challenges the boundaries of gender identities, those who are in opposition cannot help but draw their arguments from de Sade's boundless prudish carnal gratification of the flesh, neglecting how it actually started and how it is practiced today. These arguments were the meat of the debate about BDSM when it was dropped during the feminist sex war.

## **THE FEMINIST SEX WAR: THE ABOLITIONISTS VERSUS THE SEX-POSITIVES**

A war within the feminist movement broke out at the dawn of 1970 (Showden 2016). Feminists had started questioning the role of lesbians and lesbianism in the movement.

Betty Friedan, president of the United States National Organization of Women (National Organization for Women, n.d.) that time, pushed for the disunion of the issues of heterosexual “straight” women and lesbians, labeling the latter as “lavender menace.” She argued that the stereotype attached to lesbians as either misandrist or tomboyish might result to the defeat of the goal of the feminist movement, which is to push for serious political change. Some straight women sided with Friedan, but others sided with the lesbians.

In response to Friedan, the Radicalesbians (1970) started their political manifesto with “What is a lesbian?,” echoing Simone de Beauvoir’s ontological question of “What is a woman?” The Radicalesbians (1970, 1) defined the lesbian as “the rage of all women condensed to the point of explosion.” She was, at her earliest stage of her life, free to listen to her wise inner self to become who she wants to become. As she becomes more in tune with the society, however, she starts to be conscious of how people would perceive her and to believe in the thinking that the society has long-gone blindly accepted, and so she develops a conflict with all these, especially with herself, but at the end, she refuses to accept the role the society pushes her to take. The female role, which women forcefully accept, starts an inner turbulence because in one hand, she rejects her true self to accept how she is actually and should be seen, and in the other, she tries to make sense of the society’s sexism.

The labels given to those that are in between the men-women spectrum, i.e. lesbians, gays, etc., or those that have failed to enact the role given to them, happen only in a sexist society. Members of the LGBTQA+ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Asexual, & Allies) might counter-argue that these labels would empower them because it acknowledges their identity, however, in this case, the labels act as divisions with hierarchal values. Lesbians belong to the same class with that of gays, which is the class of those who have failed to take the role prepared for them by the society as soon as they were born. However, such sexism revolves around hatred towards women. There is disdain towards women and towards those who play their role. It is sickening to look at gays because they are already privileged to be men but chooses to be the Other. Meanwhile, there is reluctance when the society looks up to lesbians because they are just women trying hard to take a man’s job. As the Radicalesbians (1970, 2) perfectly put it: “Lesbian is a label invented by the man to throw at any woman who dares to be his equal, who dares to challenge his prerogatives, ... who dares to assert the primacy of her own needs.” The Radicalesbians blatantly accused the straight women of joining forces with men and their oppressive ways:

As long as the label ‘dyke’ can be used to frighten women into a less militant stand, keep her separate from her sisters, keep her from giving primacy to anything other than men and family – then to that extent she is controlled by the male culture. Until women see in each other the possibility of a primal commitment which includes sexual love, they will be denying themselves the love and value they readily accord to men, thus affirming their second-class status. As long as male acceptability is primary – both to individual women and to the movement as a whole – the term lesbian will be used effectively against women. Insofar as women want only more privileges within the system, they do not want to antagonize male power. They instead seek acceptability for women’s liberation, and the most crucial aspect of the acceptability is to deny lesbianism

– i.e., to deny any fundamental challenge to the basis of the female. It should also be said that some younger, more radical women have honestly begun to discuss lesbianism, but so far it has been primarily as a sexual ‘alternative’ to men. This, however, is still giving primacy to men, both because the idea of relating more completely to women occurs as a negative reaction to men, and because the lesbian relationship is being characterized simply by sex, which is divisive and sexist (Radicalesbians 1970, 2-3).

Friedan’s group had gone so far as to avoid the discussions to address the struggles the lesbians had been going through; the feminists supporting Friedan’s stance had laid these issues back on the broader table (Napikoski 2017), making it even more tedious to solve. For as long as women see themselves from and through men, for as long as they embed in themselves the oppressive culture that they have been brought up to, then they will continue to lose their sense of self and unconsciously feed the system of self-loathing.

As the war progressed, a new set of issues came to the surface. These bubbles on the surface remain where they have always been, even until now, even after more than forty-years since the war had started. Before, the war was between the straight women versus the lesbians. Now, it is between the abolitionists and the sex-positives. Their main concerns revolve around sexual practices such as but not limited to pornography, prostitution, and BDSM. Ann Ferguson (1984) made a side-by-side comparison of the viewpoints of the two opposing camps and offered theoretical assumptions on sexuality, social power, and sexual freedom based on the points offered. The abolitionists hold that:

1. Heterosexual sexual relations generally are characterized by an ideology of sexual objectification (men as subjects/masters; women as objects/slaves) that support male sexual violence against women.
2. Feminist should repudiate any sexual practice that supports or “normalizes” male sexual violence.
3. As feminists we should reclaim control over female sexuality by developing a concern with our own sexual priorities, which differ from men’s – that is, more concern with intimacy and less with performance.
4. The ideal sexual relationship is between fully consenting, equal partners who are emotionally involved and do not participate in polarized roles (Ferguson 1984, 108).

These points suggest that sexuality is not merely a physical act for it is an expression between sexually free individuals – meaning, those who respect each other’s body and subjectivity thus maintaining a sense of equality – that strings them together through intimate, romantic emotions. However, unbeknownst to the heterosexual couple, their sexuality becomes a tool of patriarchy, driving them to commit sexual objectification, resulting to domination over women. This is true in a setting where one assumes the role of the masculine, which, in sadomasochism, assumes the role of the sadist who has an obsession for control over the feminine, which assumes the masochistic role who willfully submits herself. These roles were presumed by the abolitionists according to the reality that they had witnessed happening in a patriarchal society. Given these, a feminist must completely

reject any practice or ideology that supports patriarchy, oppression, objectification, and lack of respect such as pornography, prostitution, and BDSM.

In contrast to the abolitionist view, the sex-positives counter-argue that:

1. Heterosexual as well as other sexual practices are characterized by repression. The norms of patriarchal bourgeois sexuality repress the sexual desires and pleasures of everyone by stigmatizing sexual minorities, thereby keeping the majority 'pure' and under control.
2. Feminists should repudiate any theoretical analyses, legal restrictions, or moral judgments that stigmatize sexual minorities and thus restrict the freedom of all.
3. As feminists we should reclaim control over female sexuality by demanding the right to practice whatever gives us pleasure and satisfaction.
4. The ideal sexual relationship is between fully consenting, equal partners who negotiate maximize one another's sexual pleasure and satisfaction by any means they choose (Ferguson 1984, 109).

Both camps urge feminists to get back the power or control that was robbed from them, and to engage in a sexual relationship where there is respect and equality. However, sex-positives value pleasure over intimacy, or to put it in better terms, unlike the abolitionist's view of human sexuality, their idea of intimacy does not revolve around romantic love. There is affinity, warmth, and affection but it grows from the shadows of the ambiguity of romantic relationships. Their intimacy is expressed through the urge to satisfy each other's erotic pleasure, through their selfless performance, which is viewed by the abolitionists as a masculine characteristic. By "selfless performance" here, I mean doing well not for the sake of one's own ego but for the sake of the pleasure of their partner. Adhering to the primacy of pleasure theory, they call out those who put labels between what is a normal sexual practice and what is otherwise. Again, we are dealing with labels that cause destructive divisions. These labels between the normal and the abnormal ones put the latter into the minority thus creating sexual repressions and a hierarchy among sexual identities; drawing a line between the "politically correct sexuality" and what is not.

The sex-positives accuse the abolitionists of creating another form of oppression against women. They ask feminists to reject any ideology, morality, or law that promotes sexual repression, that restricts women to express themselves. Women, as much as men, have the right to do whatever they wish to do with their body because it is their own body, which, at this age of post-sexual revolution, is the argument most women who claim to be feminists use when they are called out. However, just because it is their own body does not mean whatever decision they have made empower them. More often than not, they fall into the pit of false empowerment. They are deceived by the illusion that simply having the freedom to decide for themselves give them power over the society that restricts them not knowing that underneath that choice are objectifications and male gazes. If that is the case, is BDSM – a sexual practice that has very distinct power-relation dynamics, that sucks its energy from pain and torture, and that, at some point in the history, played a big role in violence against women truly empowering?

Countless debates about whether or not BDSM is indeed a feminist act have been heard. Protests not only to boycott *Fifty Shades* – although I am still firm with my stance that it was a bad representation of BDSM – but also to reject BDSM as an empowering act had made it to the headlines. Women become more fearless to unleash their dark fantasies the more we talk about the issue at hand. In the midst of this chaos and mixed-reaction, there is only one way to know whether we should slam the abolitionists for oppressing us or we should backlash against the sex-positives for feeding the male gaze. In the next section of this paper, I will provide a critical analysis of BDSM to prove that contrary to the claims of the abolitionists, BDSM is: (1) not essentially based on inequality, (2) not an advocate of sexual violence against women, and, as a matter of fact, (3) an act of reclaiming women’s control over their sexuality.

### **RESPECT: RECOGNIZING CONSENT**

Everything done within the BDSM community is consensual – from the simple ones like taking a photo of a finished rope work to complex ones like where to be whipped, even from Kink Karnival and dungeons down to private plays. They are all built from consent, which starts from negotiation. Negotiation happens before each play; it is when they talk about their hard and soft limits (or the things that are absolutely a “no” and the things that they are willing to do), their health conditions, and their safe words. The rationale behind this is the safety framework that the BDSM community has been following since 1983, knowing that BDSM is dangerous but can be made safer.

Being sexually aroused by the infliction or suffering of pain, bondage, or humiliation can lead not only to ecstasy and fulfillment, but also to destructive or self-destructive behavior that no ethical, grounded person would condone. [BDSM] releases powerful emotions and involves intense vulnerability, and the results aren’t always pretty. Sometimes people do things because of their kinks that wreck their lives – or the lives of others. This must not be forgotten or swept under the rug in the quest for social acceptance (slave david stein 2002, 4).

The phrase “safe, sane, and consensual” (SSC) has been written all over kink magazines, porn websites, and sex-positive movements. slave david stein’s<sup>14</sup> goal when he came up with that phrase was to differentiate the kind of BDSM that he had done from the abusive and destructive sadomasochism that de Sade popularized. According to him (2002, 2, 4-8) this phrase serves as a reminder that you may “Have a good time but keep your head and understand what you’re doing so you don’t end up dead or in the hospital – or send someone else there.” It received disapproval and discontentment from some of the thinkers in the community,<sup>15</sup> but SSC has remained the household “creed” for kink-positivity. slave david stein clarified its being a creed saying that anything that is defined results to limitations, which is the last thing the Gay Male S/M Activists (GMSMA), the non-profit organization based in New York behind this wrongly called “creed,” would want to do. Instead, they want to create an avenue for discussions rather than for restrictions. SSC, in itself, has ambiguities but its real purpose is to create a jump off point to how one would shape their own BDSM lifestyle rather than to dictate only up to what degree they are allowed to do.

He raised his concern about how it has been interpreted as it becomes more and more popular; it is inevitable to have a different understanding of what being “safe” in the phrase actually means. Sometimes “safe” here is taken as “risk-free” which is very far from what BDSM is because, in reality, it is full of calculated risks. Clearly, practices that are safe differ from one person to another. Going back to why the SSC is more of an open discussion rather than an imposed creed, the kind of safety depends on one’s overall well-being. For instance, for some, using synthetic ropes is safer than jute ropes because the fiber coming off from the latter could trigger asthma attack. For newbies, the degree of pain and humiliation they can endure is expectedly much lower than those who have been doing BDSM for a longer period of time. To be safe means to be careful, to be careful means to be responsible. Responsible members of the BDSM community do what are necessary, apart from knowing the human anatomy and the basics of BDSM. First, they know themselves. They should know what their own limitations are, what they are capable of, and the things they are willing to experiment on. Then, they must learn their partner’s as well.

The community takes the negotiation and when it is done extremely seriously. The need for the negotiation to be done before the play has a reason. BDSM is a highly euphoric activity. It is possible that at the height of ecstasy during the play, the limitations set out prior it could change out of impulse; however, the decision would have been made far from a rational mind. Sanity, that is the rationality and soundness of the mind, is necessary for the validity of consent. This means that they must not be under the influence of alcohol or drugs and they must be psychologically mature to make decisions. In this way, they get to choose how the play would go based on the facts, i.e. overall well-being and personal parameters, rather than on momentary circumstances.

Another thing that the community advocates, as part of their sex-, kink-, and body-positivity, is the importance of consent – or informed consent to be specific. BDSM’s gray area gets even shadier when the discussion shifts to its nuances. There are endless questions that highlight its ambiguity and ambivalence. Is passive-aggressive behavior towards giving consent acceptable? How about the absence of a “no?” Or, is it something that has to be continuously renewed? The consent in this context bears a resemblance to the affirmative model, which happens to be the trend in policy and legal efforts. Instead of the lack of rejection and opposition to engage in the activity, there has to be a mutual positive indication that both parties consent to it (Beres and MacDonald 2015, 420). It must be an explicit act. It must be communicated. It must be a “communication of a feeling of willingness” (Hickman and Muehlenhard 1990, 259), and a consent free from pressure, coercion, or force.

To answer one of the questions asked above, yes, consent is continuously renewed<sup>13</sup> and is constantly negotiated. Unavoidably, limitations change, either it pushes the boundaries or it narrows down the parameters. One’s kink changes over time. To further understand the dynamics of consent in BDSM, Beres and MacDonald (2015) presented the three types of consent within the community: (1) formal, (2) flow, and (3) blanket. Formal consent involves “detailed and explicit” (Beres and MacDonald 2015, 423) discussion of what they want to happen during the play. Those who have been practicing BDSM who are not bounded by the community express surprise by how straightforward and brutally honest this process is. In addition to that, debriefing is as important as the pre-play negotiation because it is when they can express their discontentment, discomfort, or anything they can improve on and it is also when they can acknowledge the good points. However, sometimes

and for some people, it is much preferable to have a less rigid and less intimidating process of consent. Because being too straightforward comes off as too overwhelming. Moreover, there is a different, higher level of adrenaline rush when the *Bottom* do not know what exactly is going to happen in the play or when they are stripped off from having choices. The next two types challenge the SSC framework and prove BDSM's complex shades of grey.

There is still negotiation in the next two, but it is not as boxed as how it works in formal. Some *Bottoms* enjoy the play more when they give up their choices and leave them to their *Top*. Take note that in blanket consent, they give up their explicit consent to the activities that they would like to incorporate to their play not their power to withdraw their consent. The *Bottom*'s safe words are still expected to be acknowledged and respected by the *Top* anytime during their play.

The last one is the most crucial of all because, similar to the preceding type, it involves the *Bottom*'s complete surrender to their *Top*, but this time in the absence of a safe word. The flow consent is "a process as well as an event that [occurs] through prior negotiation" (Beres and MacDonald 2015, 425). Meaning, the body language, together with other signs from the *Bottom*, is used to communicate the on-going consent which leaves much of the burden to the *Top* because they must be attentive to know when to stop and what their *Bottom* is trying to convey based on the negotiation. In addition to that, its nature of being free from safe words requires a distinctly high level of trust, much confidence in their self-awareness, and knowing one another in a deeper way. Giving up the power to stop the play confronts and provokes the *Bottom*'s self-imposed limitations, making it even more pleasurable for the masochist.

It is much uncomplicated to see the SSC framework at work in formal consent because there is a clear discussion of what has to be done and an explicit use of safe words. It is much more straightforward to point out if an act of abuse has been committed contrary to the two succeeding types of consent. Blanket and flow seem to be abusive and to break the safety framework, however, they still, as a matter of fact, do adhere to it. The absence of knowing what is bound to happen and of safe words contradict the usual definition of consent, but they remain relatively safe depending on how well the *Top* and the *Bottom* know themselves and each other. It cannot be avoided that in such cases, unwanted events occur but these cases are still consensual. In the case of blanket, the *Bottom* may withdraw their consent any time they feel uncomfortable with the *Top*'s decision. On the other hand, in flow, consent takes place as the play progresses, which means that they can communicate their unwillingness through signs and body language. Any sane person would not put their life at the hands of someone they do not trust. The complexity of blanket and flow makes them unadvisable for those who are just starting in their relationship. It is dangerous and risky, just like what slave david stein said (2002, 4) and it should never be sugarcoated. Accidents may happen, but accidents do really happen in real life, even in a non-BDSM context, but it can be made safer and lower down its probability by knowing each other deeply, acknowledging and respecting one's own limitations, and communicating well with their partner. In this way, the danger and risk involved becomes calculated.

Consent is the core of the BDSM community and it serves as much purpose in proving that BDSM is an empowering act. Behind the mask of a ruthless *Top* is a person who cares a lot for their *Bottom*'s well-being. For every *Bottom*'s display of choicelessness is a list of hard and soft limits agreed upon. Beyond the shaming and whipping is the drive to satisfy

each other. As much as consent provides protection from being abused, it also recognizes the need to respect the Other.

### SIMULATION: ENACTING A NARRATIVE

Although being sexual and aggressive are inherently rooted in the human psyche regardless of one's sex or gender, these traits have been, to a great extent, attributed as a masculine trait. Men are sexual predators preying on women; that is the narrative that is always heard. Given this, consenting to powerlessness, violence, and domination is a sign not of self-governing desire but of a clone of patriarchy. Sex-positives, like all the other feminists, certainly condone violence against women. There is so much irony then that they hold that BDSM is empowering when it revolves around master and slave dynamics, and it lives on handcuffs and paddles. Could it be true that they compromise their advocacy to free women in exchange for concretizing their kink?

Most BDSM plays are theatrical. They go so far as putting on elaborate costumes and full-on make-up to put their roles into life. Although private plays are less extravagant, it is, nonetheless, a performance. Similar to how drama works in films, when the scene requires a murder scene, it is not murder per se; it is enacting a narrative of a murder. BDSM simulates, not replicates, the scenes. (Hopkins 1994, 123). Replication insinuates that BDSM simply copies patriarchal activities in a different platform. It nevertheless supports patriarchy because core features of the patriarchal violence and domination are still present. Rape is rape. Slavery is slavery. Abuse is abuse. There is no consent, no respect, just fear that feeds only the *Top*'s desires. However, it has been established that this is not the case in BDSM. Simulation insinuates that BDSM selectively copies exogenous patriarchal practices onto a different contextual platform. It is formulated as a performance in which the *Top* and the *Bottom* are the actors. Hands are bounded, punishments are imposed, *Bottoms* are enslaved but these are all mere performance, these are mere narratives enacted for the scene. There is consent, which both the *Top* and the *Bottom* respect. In slavery, the slave is an item, a product, an object. The slave is a property of the master. The master is feared. In contrast to that, in a BDSM slave scene, the slave is not a commodity. They are persons whose wish to simulate the narrative of slavery in a safe environment is granted. They can withdraw their consent once they feel it becomes abusive.

But where do we draw the line between pain and pleasure? The radical element of BDSM is when pain is taken as pleasure. What is painful for someone might be a source of adrenaline rush for someone else. The question that begs to be asked must be: Where do we draw the line between safe harm and coercive harm? By safe harm here, I mean "violent" activities done in a safe and negotiated way. These activities must be weighed according to the skill of the *Top* and the endurance of the *Bottom*. When we speak of coercive harm, these are activities that are too dangerous to engage in that are weighed according to their limitations, regardless whether they agree to it. Since BDSM is about embodying their sexual fantasies in a safe and controlled environment, coercively harmful activities are condemned.

The real activity may seem to parallel the performed scenes but the parallel is unstable. The context of the analysis and the circumstance are different. The preparatory practices in BDSM such as the negotiation of both parties, the use of safe words, the necessary mutual definitions, all these activities are practiced in a self-defined community.

The existence of such community is one feature of BDSM that makes the accusation of replication disputable. What else is the difference between replication and simulation? Replication of such patriarchal acts limits the freedom of and inflicts harm to the *Bottom*, which is the total opposite of what is permitted in BDSM. There is the power to discuss terms, to shift roles, and to cease the activity. BDSM is about safely enacting sexual fantasies with a fully consenting partner.

### **AUTONOMY: RECLAIMING SEXUALITY**

The goal of feminism is to free women from oppression, whether it is a fight for legal rights, an urge for social equality, or an awakening of the true hidden self, but as different ideas emerge and different experiences arise, feminists start to group themselves according to how they approach the problems that women encounter. The feminists during the sexual revolution were not an exemption as discussed above. Their approaches to sexual liberation differ: the abolitionists favor the negative liberty more, or being unshackled from external constraints (“freedom from X”), while the sex-positives go with the positive liberty, or the power to act according to one’s free will (“freedom to X”) (Fahs 2014, 272-274). Although both the abolitionist and the sex-positive camps have an element of both the “freedom to” and the “freedom from,” they have the tendency to put the other at the back burner, resulting to gaps in their respective arguments. Despite their attempt to reclaim the power of women, however, the arguments offered by the abolitionists have the tendency to look at women’s sexuality through the male gaze, as a result, their idea of empowerment is restrictive and repressive. It becomes a whip that lashes women who choose to embody their kinks. It becomes a circle of rigidity and prescription rather than of freedom and liberation to choose. Throughout the battle that feminists have been fighting on for so long, there has always been pointing of fingers at somebody else; it has been a blame game. I am not discrediting the role of patriarchy and misogyny in women’s oppression; these two are certainly to be blamed for women’s suffering, but until when will women be seen through these oppressions? Or the more appropriate question when placed in the context of this paper is: when will women’s sexuality be seen just as itself?

It is important to give due appreciation to the abolitionist camp for their strong opposition to BDSM. It is crucial to understand their anxiety and paranoia when women start to hook themselves in the game. What the abolitionists want is for women to be vigilant of how their actions can actually feed the male gaze, most often than not without even knowing it. It is so much easy to blurt out “I have the right to do whatever I want to do with my body because it is my own body!” as if the mere act of exclaiming it is an act of reclaiming one’s self. But how empowering is it or is it even empowering at all?

More attention must be devoted to the insidious aspects of disempowerment. There is no single definition of “liberated sex.” Rather, sexual empowerment is a constantly moving target that requires continual critique, revision, self-reflexiveness, and (re)assessment of our own practices, cultural norms, ideologies, and visions of the self. Even my own vision of better incorporating the “freedom from” into ideas of sexual empowerment carries with it many dangerous trappings that must be cautiously navigated (e.g., not creating new

norms and hierarchies of “good” and “bad” sex; forgetting about the “politics of maybe”). Because our culture so often pathologizes “non-normative” sexual behavior, many individuals spend much time and energy defending their sexual choices, behaviors, and lifestyles against conservative, religious, politically regressive individuals and institutions. While this work is much needed and often politically effective, particularly in our current political climate, these defenses cannot preclude a critical assessment of how our sexual choices still often reflect and perpetuate sexist, classist, racist, and homophobic ideals. We must release our attachment to certain forms of negative liberty that defend us against critical “intruders.” In other words, when we insist upon radically examining, critiquing, and unpacking our own sexual lives—even at the cost of unsettling and dislodging the barricades that defend us against intrusions and judgments from the radical right—we move ever closer to a fully realized notion of sexual liberation, sexual empowerment, and sexual equality for all (Fahs 2014, 283-284).

It is perfectly understandable for the abolitionists to throw these questions out of discontentment because of all the trauma and damage that the patriarchy has done to women, and of women’s societal-imposed lack of self-realization and enlightenment.

Following argument (1) of the abolitionists, which is: “heterosexual sexual relations generally are characterized by an ideology of sexual objectification (men as subjects/masters; women as objects/slaves) that support male sexual violence against women,” there is a historically grounded assumption that men, in order to satisfy their sexual needs, can access women anytime and however they wish to, but women, being in the less powerful group, cannot access the more powerful group thus is always the victims of the male gaze, misogyny, and objectification. BDSM suffers the most when looked at the point-of-view of negative liberty because of its power-distinct and sadomasochistic dynamics, which are inherited from the patriarchal structure.

The presence of mutual respect and the absence of coercion are often neglected, keeping the focus tight to the countless accounts of abuse and violence against women. Their argument is focused on and revolves around de Sade’s account of sadomasochism, brushing away the fact that two of the pioneers of sexual domination were goddesses, that there was a point in the Victorian era when men craved for dominatrixes, and that there are more than enough representation of women taking the role of a dominant in today’s BDSM scene. Withal, the fact that BDSM challenges the boundaries of gender identities, and recognizes its fluidity and performativity is looked pass through as well because of its dynamics. The problem with the view of the abolitionists is that women’s sexuality – actually, everyone’s sexuality – is always in reference to men’s sexuality. They claim that BDSM supports the patriarchal structure regardless whether the one who assumes the role of the Top is a woman and the Bottom is a man, extending this belief up to the LGBT practice of BDSM (Dworkin 1981). There is not only a “taken-for-granted” assumption that men have access to women, but also that structures that involve the distinct use of power and domination is always derived from the patriarchal structure. Working on the idea that domination is a masculine trait and submission is a feminine one, there is disapproval on women who take the Top role condemning her for wanting that masculine power. These “taken-for-granted”

assumptions themselves hinder women from sexual progression. It contributes to shackling of women from embracing their sexual fantasies. It limits them; it puts women back to the cage where they were once imprisoned in, but I would say that this is worse because, this time, women are the ones feeding their oppression in believing that this empowers them. New destructive labels are used to distinguish what is normal sex and what is otherwise, creating a new form of othering.

The sex-positives fight for the right to choose and to satisfy her sexual fantasies given that the activities done do take into account the gender spectrum, respect and equality, and are essentially free from coercion and violence. Women are independent agents. They are individuals with the same rights as men. They have every right to exercise and enact their sexual fantasies. Women's sexuality must be treated independent from men's. They, as beings independent from men, must have their sexuality in reference to no one but to themselves. Otherwise, women are still deprived of their common sense right to autonomy.

At the heart of Kantian ethics is the idea "that autonomy is the foundation of human dignity" (Hill 1991, 43). All movements against oppression, including feminism, of course, have fought for their autonomy. They were robbed off of their dignity, treated as objects or properties. Because of the absence of the recognition of their autonomy, decisions were imposed on to them. They wished to do something, but they were forced to do something else. They were unfree, shackled, imprisoned. Departing from Kant's rigid standpoint that autonomy's basis is pure reason and can never be desires (Hill 1991, 44-47), I view autonomy here as the capacity of a person that functions as a self-governing property that empowers them. What robs a person of their freedom is the imposition of constraints (Frankfurt, 1969, 830). When the decision made is "blind, ...shaped by prejudices at odds with the noble sentiments they think are moving them" (Hill 1991, 50) then it is a decision made by an unfree person. Imagine a woman who longs for that specific cathartic release, not to mention it is essentially not an act of savagery and it puts respect above everything else, but stops herself from fulfilling her desire because the abolitionists beat her with the stick that says that she would commit an act of misogyny. This thinking has been embedded in her that it becomes her second nature. How can she be an autonomous individual if she wants to do something but quits from getting it because of an imposed ideology?

Abolitionists would condemn her and accuse her of participating in the patriarchal game of oppressing women. The scenario surely does sound familiar because it is the exact same thing the patriarchal society has been doing to her since the beginning of *history* whenever she fails to meet their expectations to her as a woman. But if that woman wants vanilla sex instead, the sex-positives would absolutely respect her desire because they want women to have choices and to make them for themselves, given that they consider what has to be taken into account, i.e. equality, respect, non-violent. Having choices and choosing what she truly desires is what truly empowers her. Through these choices, she is able to reclaim her own sexuality.

## CONCLUSION

Given the three conditions for empowerment set out in this paper – mutual respect through the acknowledgment of one's informed and affirmative consent, absence of violence

and coercion through simulation and its theatrical dynamics, and reclamation of one's own sexuality through the recognition of their autonomy - women who engage in BDSM out of the desire to fulfill their sexual fantasies are, contrary to what is conventionally known, empowered.

## NOTES

1. For 28 consecutive weeks, all the three books from the Trilogy topped the New York Times Fiction Best Sellers of 2012 (The New York Times 2012). *Fifty Shades of Freed* (2018), the last in the film series, alone earned \$137 million in its opening week. The combined Films earned about \$1 billion (Mendelson, 2018).

2. The history of the term remains unclear, but it is believed to be coined during mid-post-World War II era when movements on sexual liberation had started to march.

3. An example of which is the *Ishtar Cylinder Seal*.

4. As seen in *Queen of the Night*.

5. Such artworks include *Phyllis Dominating Aristotle, Socrates and Xantippe*, and *The Cully Flaug'd*.

6. There is an exception, but this will be discussed in the latter part.

7. Much of the opposition to *Fifty Shades* worries that Christian Grey's history of being sexually abused, unfortunately, tainted the idea that those who participate in BDSM are emotionally abused. To make the matter worse, de Sade's long history of life-long loneliness amplified the assumption that sadists are broken people.

8. The members of the BDSM community have thoroughly studied the practice, the human anatomy, and the techniques to ensure safety. Joining a legitimate BDSM community gives protection to everyone in it. They give the members a heads up when there are reports of abuse or of unsafe practice of BDSM.

9. A proof that the BDSM community has been pushed towards the sidelines with the minorities

10. "Bunny" is the term used for those who are tied up or down while those who do the tying are called "riggers."

11. See the full interview of Steven James in *Shibari: Short Documentary* (2015) directed by Alessandro Ubaldi.

12. See *World's First Shibari Healer* (2017) directed by Arthur Moore for the full interview of Bodhi Zapha.

13. For the full interview of Kinoko Hajime, see *Shibari: Bondage Art with Kinoko Hajime* (2013) directed by Aldo Lee.

14. He prefers to have his kink name in small caps and I choose to retain it in his preferred format because it is part of his identity in the community.

15. Gary Switch (2001) proposed "Risk-Aware, Consensual Kink" to fill in what is lacking in SSC. He argued that (1) in doing a negotiation, it is nearly impossible to not come across the possible risks that could arise out of the activities that they have agreed on and also there is no such thing as "safe BDSM" that is why "risk-awareness" is more appropriate than "safe"; (2) people who are under the influence of alcohol or drugs have the tendency to constantly reassure the people around them that they are otherwise, constantly reassuring the people that they are "sane" might actually just raise a red flag; (3) SSC does not indicate

what they are actually consenting to so it is more sound to call it “consensual kink” rather than just “consensual.” slave david stein counter-argued (1) by explaining that to be safe does not necessarily means being risk-free, but to be responsible and to be responsible means to be diligent in doing one’s homework, i.e. negotiating the hard and the soft limits, studying the human anatomy, and knowing what BDSM is all about. Also, concerning (2), one of the things the BDSM community is known for is their completely honest way of communicating. They don’t beat around the bush. They tell their Tops if it’s too uncomfortable, if they want to exclude something that they had included in their past plays, if something feels too good that they still want it for their next play. Lastly, regarding (3), as slave david stein raised it, SSC is not a slogan, it just became sounded like one because it has been adapted by kink-positive movements. Come to think of it, its original text was even “safe, sane, and consensual S/M.”

15. The rape allegation of high-profile porn star Stoya against her long-time co-actor, James Deen opened the discussion, at least among through the mass media, on the necessity of consent to be continuously given and is not something that once given grants unlimited access (Grant, 2015).

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