

Complicit sex: Or what's feminism got to do with it?

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Several months ago, Ellen DeGeneres, the popular US comedian and public spokeswoman for LGBT issues, parodied the erotic international bestseller *Fifty Shades of Grey* on her TV talk show. Reading various sections from the book out loud, she rolled her eyes and explained that she was ‘just not going to say those words’. Instead she substituted her own ‘secret garden’ and ‘ball peen hammer’ for women’s and men’s body parts, respectively, and smiled coyly as she rattled handcuffs and cracked a whip. She groaned weakly while beating her arm with a paddle (‘Oh, oh, oh, hurt me’) and reminded the audience that they might want to avoid the pancakes at Anastasia’s (the protagonist of the book) house given what she had done with her kitchen spatula. DeGeneres completed her ‘reading’ with the comment: ‘Maybe I’m not the right person for this, but thank you for the opportunity. I think it’s going to be a big hit.’

Don’t get me wrong – I’m a fan of Ellen DeGeneres and her skit was entertaining (as have been many of the parodies of *Fifty Shades of Grey*). However, her final comment gave me pause. After ridiculing the book for its pornographic language, its hokey representation of SM-sexuality and its portrayal of women’s desires, in particular, and heterosexuality, in general, DeGeneres washed her hands of it. While assuring us that the book was bound to be popular, she made it clear that *she* was going to have nothing to do with it. It had nothing to say to *her*, had nothing to do with *her* sexual desires and – by implication – had nothing of interest to offer any feminist who has thought critically about gender and sexuality. This is where I believe she was wrong. I want to take issue with the assumption that we, as critical feminists, cannot simply stand on the sidelines and mock popular portrayals of female desire and sexuality without accounting for our own complicity.

Fifty Shades of Grey – for those of you who may have missed it – is an erotic novel written by the British TV executive EL James. It is set in Seattle and involves the sexual relationship between the handsome, business tycoon, Christian Grey, and the naïve – and virginal – college student, Anastasia Steele. The book is notable for its explicit sex scenes involving bondage and discipline, dominance/submission and sadomasochism. Published in 2011 as the first part of a trilogy, the book has sold over 60 million copies worldwide, has topped bestseller lists in the US and UK and has become the fastest-selling paperback book of all time, surpassing even the *Harry Potter* series. It has been made into a movie, has generated numerous spoofs and persiflages (of which Ellen DeGeneres’s is but one) and has received considerable attention in the media where it has been ridiculed as ‘as hackneyed as the hoariest Mills & Boon’, ‘mommy porn’ and ‘treacly cliché’, all in one (Barnett, 2012). Despite this critique, there is no doubt that the book has drawn many enthusiastic readers, particularly among adult heterosexual women because – as

one reviewer put it – it ‘makes them feel sexy again’ and has been responsible for ‘relighting a fire under a lot of marriages’ (Bosman, 2012).

For many feminists, *Fifty Shades of Grey* is abhorrent because of its explicit violence and antiquated treatment of women, not to mention the unmistakable theme so familiar from the romance genre where the innocent heroine is swept off her feet by a powerful, but mysterious man. While there is plenty to engage our critical attention here, it seems to me that we cannot simply dismiss *Fifty Shades of Grey* as antithetical to all that feminism holds dear. Instead, we need to face up to the fact that many of the themes which grace its pages owe a debt to feminism and, indeed, would not have been possible without feminist debates on sexuality.

Sexuality has, of course, long been a subject of feminist controversy. In 1973, Nancy Friday published *The Secret Garden* in which she collected the erotic fantasies of women in which they displayed an unmistakably longing to be dominated – and even humiliated – by a powerful man and were not adverse to ‘perverse’ sexual practices. Some feminists were incensed, arguing that this had nothing to do with ‘feminist sexuality’, which was always reciprocal, preferably genital, and not necessarily genital. In the 1980s, the so-called ‘sex wars’ erupted in which feminists engaged in heated debates about women’s sexual pleasures and desires. Who can forget the impassioned attack of the then-SM lesbian activist Pat Califia (she later transitioned and became Patrick), on the moral elitism of mainstream feminism with its insistence on a politically correct feminist sexuality. Situating herself in the camp of the ‘erotic minorities’, she made a convincing case that pleasure could come in many forms and this included sexual fantasies of domination and submission, sadomasochism and the eroticization of power. While Califia’s position was not shared by all, it pushed feminist discussions of female desire and sexuality in new directions. Queer theory, one of the most popular and important theoretical paradigms within gender studies today, owes a debt to these debates which facilitated the appreciation of sexual diversity and the complexity of sexual desire and practice. One could argue that the current popularity of explicitly erotic novels like *Fifty Shades of Grey* is simply the ‘trickle down effect’ of a process which had its roots in feminist controversy. In short, however much we may dislike, disdain, or feel guilty about this latter day explorations of women’s sexuality, we are complicit.

But what does complicity mean for the critical feminist scholar? Obviously, there are many instances of complicity as has been discussed in connection with far weightier topics than SM-sex: from everyday racism to nationalist movements, the legacy of colonialism, or the Enlightenment underpinnings of equality thinking. Feminism is not – and never has been – innocent; like anything else, it is influenced by that which it presumably abhors.

This has several implications.

First, we need to acknowledge complicity, if only because denial will get us nowhere. Nor is taking the moral high ground a satisfactory option. Complicity does not mean that we have to like the phenomenon in question. It neither entails total acceptance, nor does it call for abject wallowing in guilt (‘How could we have been so stupid/naïve/...’). Complicity entails involvement – in the sense of being ‘folded together’, which is the Latin root of the word. This involvement can be personal, but it may also refer to one’s membership in a larger historical, national, cultural, or political collectivity.

Second, acknowledging complicity does not necessarily mean taking personal responsibility, but it does mean taking responsibility for further analysis. We are responsible for becoming aware, for not being silent. As critical feminist scholars, our task is to be both critical and reflexive. This means exploring the – often subtle – ways that feminism as a movement and body of thought has contributed to social practices, cultural imaginaries, as well as to relations of power involving domination, marginalization, or inferiorization.

And, last but not least, attending to past complicity does not absolve us of the need to explore the specifics of the present context. *Fifty Shades of Grey* does not simply recycle the themes which were part of earlier feminist debates about female desire and sexuality. It rearticulates them in accordance with the current cultural and social circumstances. As one journalist noted, somewhat pessimistically, the book provides an old fantasy to resolve some very modern problems: loneliness, fears of commitment and the monotony of monogamous matrimony (Fresco, 2012). The global popularity of *Fifty Shades of Grey* as well as its astronomical sales figures, the fact that it has touched a nerve among so many women, and what it says about the possibilities of sexual desire and the limitation of (hetero)sexual relations deserve more than a humorous dismissal; they require our most serious and committed attention.

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