

Reading Postfeminism in the *Fifty Shades*

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Tiivistelmä – Abstract				
<p><i>Fifty Shades</i> on E. L. Jamesin kirjoittama trilogia, josta tuli kansainvälinen myyntimenestys ja sensaatio sen julkaisuvuonna 2012. Trilogia aiheutti kohua sen sisältämän erotiikan vuoksi, minkä takia sitä alettiin kutsua mediassa ”äitipornoksi”. Esitän tässä tutkielmassa, että huolimatta siitä että <i>Fifty Shades</i> on ylistetty naisia voimaannuttavaksi ja seksuaalisesti vapauttavaksi, se itse asiassa välittää ja vahvistaa niitä konservatiivisia ja patriarkaalisia arvoja joita se vaikuttaa ravistavan. Luen trilogiaa kriittisesti postfeministisestä näkökulmasta ja osoitan, kuinka postfeministiset ideologiat toimivat siinä.</p> <p>Postfeminismin käsite, jolla on monia määritelmiä, muodostaa tutkielmani teoreettisen ytimen. Pohjaan määritelmäni muun muassa Susan Faludin, Rosalind Gillin ja Imelda Whelehanin aihetta käsitteleviin tutkimuksiin. Tässä tutkielmassa hyödynnän käsityksiä postfeminismistä ”backlashina” eli vastaiskuna feminismiä kohtaan sekä sensitiivisyytenä. Kontekstoin <i>Fifty Shades</i>in populaari- ja rakkausromaanikirjallisuuteen. Rakkausromaanin –lajia voidaan pitää vastaiskutekstien yhtenä muotona, ja sellaisena näen myös <i>Fifty Shades</i> –trilogian.</p> <p>Analyysiosiossa osoitan, kuinka <i>Fifty Shades</i> käyttää hyväkseen populaari – ja rakkausromaanilajien konventioita. Analysoin, kuinka postfeministiset näkemykset seksuaalisuudesta, kehosta ja kulutuksesta välittyvät tekstistä ja kuinka yksiavioiset parisuhteet ja heteroseksuaalisuus ovat itsestäänselvyyksiä trilogiassa. <i>Fifty Shades</i> korostaa ja erotsoi niin sukupuolten välistä eroa kuin varakkuutta ja sosiaalista asemaakin.</p>				
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Tiivistelmä – Abstract <p>The <i>Fifty Shades</i> is a best-selling trilogy of books written by E. L. James. Its publication in 2012 caused an international sensation because of its eroticism and the books were called “mommy-porn” in the media. In this thesis, I argue that despite being praised as empowering and sexually liberating to women, the <i>Fifty Shades</i> actually conveys and re-asserts the conservative and patriarchal ideologies it appears to shake. I present a critical postfeminist reading of the trilogy and show how postfeminist ideologies are present in it.</p> <p>The theoretical background of this study is postfeminism, a concept that has a number of definitions. I base my definition on the works of Susan Faludi, Rosalind Gill and Imelda Whelehan, among others. For this thesis, postfeminism as a backlash and as a sensibility are the central concepts. Furthermore, I contextualize the <i>Fifty Shades</i> in popular and romance fiction genres. Romance fiction can also be seen as a form of a backlash text, which is how I see the trilogy.</p> <p>In the analysis, I discuss the conventions of popular and romance fiction and show how they are used in the <i>Fifty Shades</i>. I analyze the ways in which postfeminist views on sexuality, body and consumption are mediated in the text. I will also show how monogamous relationships and heterosexuality are an unchallenged given in the trilogy. The <i>Fifty Shades</i> emphasizes and eroticizes gender difference as well as wealth and social status, too.</p>				
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1. Introduction

Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra argue that, while popular culture portrays women as equal to men, feminist critique is needed to demonstrate that it is not so:

the necessity of feminist critique, at a time when women face significant challenges to their economic well-being, hard-won reproductive rights, and even authority to speak, while popular culture blithely assumes that gender equality is a given, seems to us self-evident. (12)

This is my guiding principle in this thesis: that critical study of popular and postfeminist culture is necessary in order for us to understand how popular culture works to mediate and establish postfeminist ideologies of womanhood. Furthermore, according to Eva Illouz, “best-sellers are defined by their capacity to capture values and outlooks that are either dominant and widely institutionalized or widespread enough to become mainstreamed by a cultural medium” (location 97). Therefore, the aim of this thesis is to show how postfeminist ideologies are conveyed and reinforced in the popular E.L. James’s trilogy of books, the *Fifty Shades*.

The trilogy is an erotic bestseller, revolving around the themes of love, sex and a complicated relationship between its two main protagonists, Ana and Christian. It belongs to the popular genre of romance fiction, and has sold over a hundred million copies worldwide and it has been translated into 51 languages (Flood, “*Fifty Shades of Grey* trilogy” n.p.). The *Fifty Shades* became the publishing phenomenon of 2012 when it was released as a paperback by Arrow, and it led to E. L. James being awarded the Publishing

Person of the Year by *Publisher's Weekly* (Deahl n.p.). Thus, it can be said that the popularity of the trilogy justifies its critical study.

1.1 Structure and Aims

First, I am going to introduce all the three books in the trilogy, *Fifty Shades of Grey*, *Fifty Shades Darker*, and *Fifty Shades Freed*. I will then move on to introduce their writer, E. L. James, who became famous very quickly after the publication of the books. The final part of the first chapter locates the trilogy in the traditions of popular and romance fiction and discusses the change in publishing industry that, on one hand, helped the trilogy's success and on the other was accelerated by its success.

In the second chapter, I am going to discuss the often ambiguous term *postfeminism* and define its meanings. Postfeminism can be seen as a backlash against feminism or as a movement coming after feminism, rendering feminism outdated and unnecessary. It can also be seen as a critical stance towards feminism that focuses on sexual empowerment and the celebration of gender difference instead of the alleged "rigid man-hating" of the second wave feminists. The postfeminist ideologies that can be found in the *Fifty Shades* are, for example, emphasis on sexuality, patriarchal composition of power that remains despite the reassurances to the contrary, and the display of wealth and consumption. These traits are also familiar in other postfeminist popular texts such as Helen Fielding's *Bridget Jones's Diary* and Candice Bushnell's *Sex and the City*.

The third chapter links the *Fifty Shades* to the traditions of popular fiction and romance fiction. Romance fiction especially shares the ideologies of the postfeminist, sexualized consumption culture, and, as will be shown, it is the ideal form of a backlash text

(romance fiction also has the potential for change, but that is another issue). A discussion of how the postfeminist ideologies are mediated and reinforced in the trilogy forms a part of the analysis. I argue that, despite being praised as empowering to women, the *Fifty Shades* actually conveys and reasserts the conservative and patriarchal ideologies it appears to shake.

1.2 The Trilogy and the Writer

In the first volume, *Fifty Shades of Grey*, we are introduced to Anastasia Steele, the first person narrator and the protagonist of the popular books series. In the beginning, she is still an English student at Washington State University, Vancouver, finishing her studies in English literature (James, *Grey* 8). She promises to interview Christian Grey, the CEO of Grey Enterprises Holdings, Inc. for their student magazine on behalf of her ill friend Kate. Instead of a middle-aged businessman, Ana encounters a stunningly good-looking, 27-year-old multimillionaire. During the interview they both feel an interest in each other, and afterwards Christian contacts Ana in order to suggest her a “submissive contract” (*Grey* 100). A submissive is a person sexually dominated by his/her master, who will “agree to any sexual activity deemed fit and pleasurable by the Dominant” (*Grey* 105). Ana, an inexperienced virgin, is appalled at first, but she is so attracted to the enigmatic CEO that she cannot say no – even when Christian continuously warns her that he is not a “hearts and flowers kind of guy” (*Grey* 72). This Ana will learn the hard way, as she is introduced to Christian’s “Red Room of Pain” (*Grey* 98) and as she finds out that Christian will not allow himself to be touched. Their beginning is tumultuous, and at the end of the volume Ana cannot bear Christian’s sexual behavior anymore and leaves him.

During the first volume, Anastasia graduates from college, moves to Seattle (where Christian Grey also lives) and starts working at a publishing company, SIP. The second volume, *Fifty Shades Darker*, starts from there. In it, Ana returns to Christian, still worried that she is not good enough for him. As their relationship strengthens, she is threatened by both Christian's ex-submissive, Leila and her own boss, Mr. Jack Hyde. She also talks with Dr Flynn, Christian's psychiatrist, and asks him about the issues worrying her about their relationship. Before that, however, Ana has already consented to marry Christian – after having known him for only a few months. Towards the end of the volume, Christian's helicopter is sabotaged and Ana has to live through the fear of losing him.

The third volume, *Fifty Shades Freed*, begins with Ana and Christian's honeymoon. When they return home, Ana finds that she is pregnant, her stepfather is in a serious car accident, and she herself is kidnapped by her boss. As expected, Christian is not thrilled about the pregnancy, and a serious crisis in their marriage follows. In the end, the crisis is solved, and she and Christian have two children. The end of the trilogy has a chapter written from Christian's point of view, giving the reader a glimpse of what he thought when first seeing Ana. It is an interesting addition to the novels, and many fans have been inquiring whether James will write more from Christian's viewpoint (James, *Homepage* np).

All in all, the three books in the *Fifty Shades* series describe an evolving relationship between an immature girl and a megalomaniac CEO that is spiced with mild bdsm (bdsm stands for bondage and discipline, dominance and submission, and sadism and masochism) scenes, lots of sex, some threatening events, and Christian's dark past. There are plenty of descriptions of Christian's wealth, and all the glorious things that money

can buy for a girl. As a sideline, Christian's brother becomes engaged with Ana's best friend, Kate, and his sister is involved with Kate's brother, Ethan. So, there are three happy couples living a wealthy life – the Kavanagh siblings are rich as well, getting married, and starting families. After all, bdsm does not play such a major part in the trilogy as media has made it sound to be, since Ana is against it almost all the time and eventually Christian accepts to leave it out of their relationship altogether. As James herself has said, *Fifty Shades* is more about love than bdsm.

E. L. (Erica Leonard) James is a former TV executive who wrote the story while commuting to work and back. She is a wife and a mother of two, which apparently did not diminish the hype around her: quite the contrary, people were excited to see that an ordinary person could become a popular writer, and that a mother would be able to write such raunchy texts as to excite millions of people worldwide. Naturally, there were also those who admonished James for setting a bad example for young people (Lewak n.p.) and for shaming her teenage sons (Bond n.p.). She has also been accused of promoting domestic violence (*BBC Fifty* n.p.) because the protagonist Anastasia submits herself to an abusive, mentally unstable man who is into bondage and sadomasochism. In her defense, James has said that she only wanted to write down her own fantasies (*ABC News*), and that she wants to be remembered as someone who can tell a “rollicking good love story” (Greenstreet n.p.). Furthermore, she admits that a man like Christian Grey may not be what women want in real life: “I think in real life [...] you want someone who does the dishes,” and says that she does not consider herself a great writer, the success of the trilogy having come to her as a complete surprise (*USA Today*).

On her website, James calls the trilogy “adult provocative romance” (James, *Homepage* np), which seems to be a more appropriate term for the genre than “mommy porn,” which

she dislikes. James has said that she finds the term “mommy porn” demeaning and misogynistic: “women aren’t allowed to write about sex, to read about sex, to think about sex. God forbid that women have fantasies” (Donahue n.p.). To those concerned about her children, James says that her sons are proud of her, but also bemused and making fun of her, which is completely natural (Donahue n.p.). In the “Frequently Asked Questions” section on her website, James tells about the premise she had for the *Fifty Shades* story: “What would happen if you were attracted to somebody who was into the bdsm lifestyle, when you weren’t?” (*Homepage* n.p.) It is this simple yet interesting premise that set forth the story that eventually gained James the 2012 UK National Book Awards for Popular Fiction Book of the Year and the 2012 Goodreads Choice Award for Best Romance (James, *Homepage* n.p.), and also led to her choice as the Publishing Person of the Year by *Publisher’s Weekly* (Deahl np.)

When it comes to James’s writing style, she uses a great deal of details, which slows down the pace of the narration and also elongates the trilogy unnecessarily. For example: “Coldplay continues as I sit cross-legged on my bed. The Mac powers up and I log in” (James, *Darker* 41), and “[l]eaning past me, he switches the gas off. The oil in the wok quiets almost immediately” (James, *Darker* 65). Sometimes the focus on minute details becomes ridiculous, as when Christian and Ana are having a passionate moment, but Christian is sensible enough to worry about the chicken that should be put into the fridge (James, *Darker* 65). Another example would be getting rid of a used condom: “[h]e stands and removes the condom, knotting it at the end, and puts it in his pants pocket” (*Grey* 350).

Moreover, James uses expressions that either sound too weird to come from a character's mouth: "from a very tiny, underused part of my brain – probably located at the base of my medulla oblongata near where my subconscious dwells" (James, *Grey* 26), or that are just plainly ridiculous: "leaving me a quivering mass of raging female hormones" (James, *Grey* 31). Considering that the writing in the series is generally simple, sentences like the following one sound odd: "desire detonates like an incendiary device igniting my bloodstream" (James, *Freed* 523). What is the most irritating feature of her writing, however, is the over-abundant use of expressions such as "holy cow," "crap," "double-crap," and "jeez." Admittedly, it is James's style that, though annoying, may be one of the keys to her success, because it is simple enough for everyone to read.

1.3 Locating *Fifty Shades*

It is important to locate the *Fifty Shades* trilogy in its context in order to understand the phenomenon and the circumstances that have led to its success. To begin with, *Fifty Shades* is a part of the popular culture and popular fiction, emerging from the tradition of romance fiction. Furthermore, the changes in the fields of publishing and marketing paved way for the trilogy's success as the books were easily available online and could be read unnoticed on tablets and behind discreet book covers. Next, I am going to take a closer look to popular fiction and romance and then move on to discuss the practices of publishing and marketing.

In Gelder's view, popular fiction is clearly distinguished from literary fiction (literature with a capital L) by several characteristics: firstly, popular fiction writers are called *writers*, not authors, because their writing is considered in terms of hard work and productivity instead of creativity and originality (1, 15). Popular fiction is industrial, not

creative, as evidenced by the sheer number of works published by a single writer and by the generic nature of these books (Gelder 15). Secondly, as Gelder claims, the industrial nature of popular fiction is *intentional*: the writer want their books to sell and so write the reading audience in mind (22). Often, popular fiction writers are very media-friendly and credit their fans for their success: they are happy to attend meetings with fans and usually they have their own homepages for notifications and frequently asked questions (Gelder 23). According to Gelder, this productivity and media-friendliness leads to massive sales, if not always, at least more often than the sales of literary fiction (24).

According to Ken Gelder, popular fiction is essentially genre fiction (1). What this means is that the writers are well aware of the conventions of their genre, as are their publicists and distributors (Gelder 41). A popular fiction book is, therefore, often marketed as a representative of its genre rather than by the name of the writer (Gelder 41). By genre, a reader knows what she is having when she makes the decision to buy a certain book, and, in fact, genre “provides the primary logic for popular fiction’s means of production, formal and industrial identification and critical evaluation” (Gelder 40). Genre induces reader loyalty that is not necessarily dependent on a single writer (Gelder 81).

Reading experience is another distinguishing factor between literary fiction and popular fiction, claims Gelder, although he disagrees with the common assumptions of the critics such as Pam McIntyre and Suman Gupta who write that while literary fiction is read slowly and with thought, popular fiction is often consumed quickly and without criticism (Gelder 36, 38). Instead, Gelder argues that while the readers of popular fiction may read quickly, it does not mean that they are uncritical, as the readers do register its minutiae and respond to them (38). Furthermore, popular fiction is sensuous fantasy, exaggerating

and exciting, telling a story, which makes it a thrilling read (Gelder 19). It is also usually simpler than literary fiction, devoid of complexities and ornate language. In other words, popular fiction can be read leisurely with little intellectual effort, whereas literary fiction is more demanding (Gelder 36). Readers of popular fiction often describe their reading experience as compulsive: they simply *have* to know what happens next. This is why popular fiction books are sometimes called “page-turners” (Gelder 37). Moreover, the purpose of reading can be said to differ from literary fiction to popular fiction: readers of literary fiction read in order to learn and be “closer to life itself”, while readers of popular fiction read to distract themselves from their ordinary lives (Gelder 37).

Furthermore, popular fiction has *fans* that know a lot about a certain genre or a certain writer (Gelder 81). They start websites and fan groups dedicated to the genre/writer they are fans of, gather information, discuss the books and characters and even arrange trips to specific locations mentioned in the books (Gelder 86). For example, the number of *Fifty Shades* fansites is great, and hotels such as Edgewater Hotel and Heathman hotel offer their own *Fifty Shades* themed holiday packages (Travelchannel.com.) This is also another way to commercialize popular fiction: fans are happy to purchase various by-products. The fans of *Fifty Shades* have a wide market of by-products available to them: sex toy kits, baby onesies, make-up and lingerie, a classical music album and wine, to name but a few.

One further strategy to commercialize a popular fiction book is to adapt it to the movie screen. In fact, this has proven to be such a successful maneuver, that it is suggested that popular fiction writers often write their works with screenplay adaptation in mind (Gelder 28). *Fifty Shades* is no exception: it has a movie with a release date set in Valentine’s Day

2015, and the fans have speculated on it ever since the first rumors of a *Fifty Shades* movie emerged. All in all, popular fiction is not just about texts; it is also about production, distribution, merchandizing, and consumption. Popular fiction is entertainment industry, derisively regarded as “capitalism’s most perfect literary form” (Gelder 35).

One central genre of popular fiction is the romance, which can be seen as a “dominant cultural narrative” and as a discourse that the Western world is “obsessed with” (Gill 218). Although divorce rates are higher than before, single women no longer need a husband to support them, and family forms have diversified, heterosexual romance has kept its place as the dominant discourse (Gill 218). Seen as a patriarchal form of literature, romance fiction has been criticized by second wave feminists for justifying women’s subordination to men and for making its readers passive (Gill 220). However, Tania Modleski and Janice Radway were the first to study romance fiction from a different perspective in the 1980s, refusing to dismiss or condemn women’s genres right away (Gill 221). After their ground-breaking works, the discussion changed further through the Internet, which made it possible for readers and writers of romance fiction to take part in the conversation previously dominated by academics (Gill 224). Contemporary discussion on romance fiction centers on issues of race, lesbianism and postcolonialism, for example (Gill 225). Discussions are numerous because romance fiction has power as a discourse as it has a wide audience and has endured for decades despite cultural and demographic changes (Gill 218).

Fifty Shades of Grey can be read as drawing on the conventions of paperback Harlequins and Mills & Boon. These conventions include a protagonist that dresses exquisitely with

taste (this is not true for Anastasia in the beginning, however, she learns to do so with the help of her personal shopping assistant) and is attractive, yet ordinary enough for the readers to identify with her (Assiter 113). The hero with whom the protagonist uncontrollably falls in love is superbly handsome, physically perfect, obscenely rich and dominating. He is the embodiment of “hegemonic masculinity, presented as desirable, highly eroticized and utterly irresistible” (Talbot 107). The emphasis on the protagonists’ physical features is meant to maximize gender difference in order to eroticize the relationship between them: the man is muscular and powerful, active and controlling, whereas the woman is slender and nervous, passive and emotional (Talbot 109).

Usually, the heroine is younger and poorer than the hero (Assiter 114), and much less experienced in sexual relationships. In fact, the heroine is often “characterized by childlike innocence and inexperience [...] these heroines are completely unaware that they are capable of passionate sexual urges” (Radway 126). A true romance heroine is also unaware of her beauty and its effects on others (Radway 126), which further indicates her innocence. So then, the heroine is overcome by the hero’s masculinity and sexuality, and experiences desire she has never felt before. She cannot help being attracted to the aggressive hero, who is well aware of his charm, and uses it to seduce the heroine.

Furthermore, the heroine’s innocence is contrasted with the hero’s previous sexual relationships: the woman is inexperienced while the man has sexual prowess achieved by multiple previous experiences. This is made tolerable for the heroine because the hero has never loved his partners and only finds his true love in the arms of the heroine (Radway 130). Similarly, the intimidating masculinity of the hero is softened by a glimpse of vulnerability underneath, seen by the heroine as a sign that the hero is, after all, a good

man and hence worthy of her love (Radway 128). He only needs the love of a good woman to change from the beast to a loving prince. It is about the female fantasy of changing the “bad boy”, as aptly put by Janice Radway:

in learning *how to read* a man properly, the romance tells its reader, she will reinforce his better instincts, break down his reserve, and lead him to response to her as she wishes. Once she has set the process in motion by responding warmly to his rare demonstrations of affection [...] she will further see that his previous impassivity was the result of a former hurt. (148; emphasis original)

Therefore, the hero has an acceptable reason for his promiscuity and strange, cold behavior in a former hurt that has made him incapable of love.

Another essential aspect of romance fiction is eroticism; Alison Assiter goes even so far as to argue that romance fiction is pornography for women, because it serves to excite and positions the woman in the traditional feminine role (112-119). Moreover, romance fiction eroticizes domination (Assiter 119), as the power of a man over a woman is eroticized (Talbot 109). He is confident and experienced, while the woman is insecure, and so the man is able to dominate the woman, while she can only respond with desire to please him (Assiter 118). Therefore, sexuality as depicted in these books confirms the roles of the “feminine” woman and the “masculine” man, making women willing submissives to male power (Assiter 119). The heroine yields under her overwhelming desire for the hero and gives up the control of her body. Her utmost desire, though, is to please the hero (Assiter 119).

Moreover, sexuality displayed in romance fiction is always heterosexual and monogamous, having its fulfillment in matrimony (Radway 15, 17). As Assiter claims, “sex is never present without fantasy, love and the possibility of marriage” (116). In the words of Radway, patriarchal marriage is prescribed as the ultimate route to the realization of mature female subjectivity (17). Anne Cranny-Francis goes even so far as to claim that the erotic desire motivating the narrative enacts not only the erotic desires of the reader, but their economic desires as well: the desire for wealth, security and status (183). In sum, the eroticism of romance fiction stems from the hero’s physical desire for the heroine who desires to be desired and to please the hero in order to get married and thus elevate her social and economic status. In other words, eroticism is composed of male dominance and power in physical, economic and social terms and of female submission.

The ultimate demonstration of a man’s power over woman is rape, which is another common feature in romance fiction. According to Radway, rape in romance is tolerated and rationalized when it occurs under certain circumstances: when the hero finds the heroine so irresistible or mistakes her for a prostitute (141). The readers Radway studied were not angry at the men *for the rape itself*, but for the men’s stupidity at not understanding that the heroine is a good woman and not sexually promiscuous (142). Therefore, these readers agree with the patriarchal axiom that women must control their sexuality if they do not want to be raped (Radway 142). What rape does in these romances is that it frees the heroine to enjoy the sexual encounter, without being shamed for being “too easy”. It is rape in which “the woman submits and enjoys sex” (Assiter 117). In romance, scenes that would otherwise be called rape are belied by the promise of marriage vows: domination by a man appears in the guise of love (Assiter 120). Rape signifies

sustaining male dominance and it serves as the “essentialist patriarchal characterization of masculinity” (Cranny-Francis 183).

Moreover, the language of romantic fiction is intentionally simple and descriptive, as it is used to tell a story, and nothing more. Simple language makes the story easy to follow and renders interpretation unnecessary, which is what most readers of popular fiction want (Radway 196). Even the obvious is explained, and the characters never just *say* something; they snap angrily, ask innocently, answer honestly and so on. Furthermore, the events of a romance usually happen in real-life locations, which are thoroughly described by the writer in order to make the story sound real (Radway 188). Adding to realism are the stories’ minute details of the characters’ style and dress and their material surroundings (Radway 195).

Lastly, *Fifty Shades of Grey* has been called a “game-changer”: not only did it change the way of publishing from old-school print to e-books, it also changed the way of marketing (Christian 17). The *Fifty Shades* trilogy emerged at a time when electronic reading devices were becoming widespread and virtual publishing companies were emerging, factors that have both contributed to the success of the trilogy. The novels were first published by a virtual-only publishing company, The Writer’s Coffeeshop, and the cover of an electronic reading device protected others from finding out what “steamy” literature people were actually reading. Assisted by these relatively new publishing and reading customs, the success of the trilogy on the other hand helped these forms to develop further: big publishing companies realized that the future is online and started to invest more in electronic publications.

Moreover, big publishing companies started to invest more in erotic literature after having realized that there indeed is a huge market for it. For example, the literary agent Louise Fury talks about the difficulties she had getting any “kinky” books published in print before the *Fifty Shades* phenomenon, but how nowadays the publishers are practically tearing erotic manuscripts out of agents’ hands. The competition is strong: “Berkley snapped up veteran romance writer Sylvia Day’s self-published erotic romance in a major deal and later bought author Sylvain Renard’s *Gabriel’s Inferno* and *Gabriel’s Rapture* from a small digital publisher for seven figures” (Fury 23). Fury sums it up: “Romance is a multibillion-dollar business and erotic content is a huge part of that market” (24).

When it comes to marketing, E.L. James did not have massive advertising budget to begin with, but she used social networking and viral marketing very effectively to build a fan base on the internet (Christian 18). Her original story on a fan fiction site, *The Master of the Universe*, was very popular, and readers waited for each chapter eagerly. Had the story not been that popular, it would not have become a sales success outside of the fan fiction community, either (Tan 297).

An important part of marketing the printed versions was to make the covers *incognito*; prior to *Fifty Shades*, erotica books usually had explicit covers and titles. Cover art left nothing to the imagination, nor did titles such as *Pure Sex* and *Sex Drive*, which meant that books in this genre were either automatically refused in brick and mortar bookshops or put into a small corner with little space for new titles (Day 28). However, the publishers of *Fifty Shades* relied on subtle images in their covers. Although nowadays almost everyone knows what the books look like and what they are about, before their fame the bland wrappers offered a “respectable” cover. Since then, many other publishers have

followed and even changed already existing titles into new, subtler ones to boost their sales (Day 29).

To summarize, *Fifty Shades*, the trilogy of books by E. L. James, can be located to the genres of popular fiction and romance fiction. Popular fiction is the umbrella term under which romance fiction is situated: their common feature is, for example, easy language that enables quick reading. Both popular and romance fiction tend to be generic, that is, when a reader picks up a book that belongs to a certain genre, such as western, romance or sci-fi, they know what they will get, and the books are usually sold by genres. The *Fifty Shades* differs from popular fiction in this respect, as it is sold as *the* book and not as a representative of romance fiction, for example. This is due to its popularity and massive sales that were enabled by the changes in publishing industry. These changes include electronic publishing, viral marketing and subtle book covers.

2. Postfeminism

Postfeminism is an essential term in this thesis, as it forms the foundation of my analysis. The term is widely used in the media and popular culture in particular, where it is taken to signify that women enjoy and exploit their femininity and sexuality freely. These women have freed themselves from the oppressive and restrictive atmosphere of second wave feminism, which they accuse of taking all the fun out of being a woman (see Naomi Wolf, for example). However, within the academia, there are several definitions of postfeminism and a plenty of discussion over the issue. According to Rosalind Gill, there is no parallel term for postfeminism, which makes the disagreements over its meaning “even more difficult to grasp” (250). That is, one term serves various significations and there is no mutual agreement as to what postfeminism actually means.

In this chapter, I am going to introduce the four meanings of postfeminism as divided by Rosalind Gill and Christina Scharff: postfeminism as an epistemological break within feminism, as a historical shift after the second wave feminism, as a backlash against feminism, and as a sensibility. The constituent definition of postfeminism for this thesis is that postfeminism is a sensibility that “suffuses contemporary Western media culture” (Gill 259) and that entangles feminist and anti-feminist ideas.

Then, I am going to describe briefly the postfeminist agenda of Naomi Wolf, one of postfeminism’s most prominent writers. I will proceed to put postfeminism in context with New Traditionalism and third wave feminism. They are both concurrent but distinct tendencies, though having similarities with postfeminism. Lastly, I am going to discuss how postfeminism presents itself in popular culture and in the attitudes of celebrities, and how postfeminist texts such as Helen Fielding’s *Bridget Jones’s Diary* has been studied.

2.1 Defining the Term

Susan Faludi published *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against Women*, in 1992. The book discusses the various expressions of backlash against feminism through the years, focusing especially on the backlash at the 1980s. According to Faludi, the term postfeminism was first used already in the 1920s, after the suffragists had won the vote for women and began to form their own trade unions (20). The term reappeared in the 1980s media, when feminism was deemed “uncool” (Faludi 95).

Nowadays, the term has got a taken-for-granted status, although its users are not always aware of the wide range of its meanings (Gill and Scharff 3). Furthermore, postfeminism as a movement lacks a collective agreement on a set of ideologies and theories, which further complicates the defining of the term. What is more, the personalities associated with postfeminism, such as Naomi Wolf, have had that term applied to them by others instead of having claimed it for themselves (Gamble 45). Since feminism has never had a unified agenda, though, postfeminism does not have a secure and unified origin from which it could shape itself (Genz and Brabon 4). It is probably best to say that postfeminism is context-specific, that is, it has a variety of readings that need to be “assessed dynamically in the relationships and tensions between its various manifestations and contexts” (Genz and Brabon 5).

To help understand the meanings of the widely-used but amorphous term, Rosalind Gill and Christina Scharff have divided its uses into four ways: postfeminism as an epistemological break within feminism, as a historical shift after the second wave feminism, as a backlash against feminism, and as a sensibility (3). The epistemological

break means change *within* feminism, the intersection of feminism with postmodernism and postcolonialism where the prefix *post* means critical engagement to the previous, rather than that the previous has been overcome and replaced (Brooks 1). In other words, postfeminism is an ongoing process that challenges the previous feminist epistemologies.

However, seen as a historical shift from the second wave feminism the prefix *post* comes to mean the pastness of feminism, coming after it. This meaning implies that gender equality has already been achieved, and therefore, feminism has become irrelevant to a new generation of women that have already ‘arrived’ (Whelehan, *Overloaded* 3). In other words, since postfeminism supplants feminism, the two cannot coexist (Projansky 67) and hence feminism is dead. According to Sarah Projansky, this is a linear understanding of feminism: seeing the historical trajectory of feminism from prefeminism to feminism to postfeminism where the latter always supplants the former (67).

Furthermore, the backlash discourse attributes all of women’s unhappinesses to feminism. According to the anti-feminist backlash, the feminism of the 1970s is the sole reason for man-shortage, infertility epidemics, women’s mental health problems, and so on, and women would be better off without it (Faludi 1-2). While trying to “have it all”, women actually lost: uniting domestic life with work proved to be exhausting because it meant double-work since men did not take their part of domestic work. Therefore, not being able to do it all, “‘proved’ that women should have settled for their traditional lot in life” (Whelehan, *Overloaded* 16) instead of demanding the right for their own careers. Moreover, feminism made women “unattractive, unmarriageable and miserable,” and so gender equality is incompatible with femininity and motherhood especially (Whelehan, *Overloaded* 17). The backlash discourse goes even so far as to suggest that feminism is

the “preserve of only the unstable, mannish, unattractive woman who has naturally difficult relationship to her own femininity” and who just wants to spoil normal women’s lives by making them feel bad about their “normal” life choices (Whelehan, *Overloaded* 18).

The backlash discourse is effectively generated and kept alive in the mass media and marketing that are, according to Faludi, two institutions that have “more effective devices for constraining women’s aspirations than coercive laws and punishments” (68). What makes them so effective is that they claim to speak for female public opinion instead of male interest, thus benefiting from conformity (Faludi 68). While the media publishes studies on and interviews with unhappy, manless women, advertising industry tells women that their empowerment is in their wallets and the choice of goods they purchase.

Lastly, postfeminism as a sensibility means the ubiquitous characterization of gender representations in the media, as listed by Gill:

the notion that femininity is a bodily property; the shift from objectification to subjectification; the emphasis upon self-surveillance, monitoring and discipline; a focus upon individualism, choice and empowerment; the dominance of a makeover paradigm; the articulation or entanglement of feminist and anti-feminist ideas; a resurgence in ideas of natural sexual difference; a marked sexualization of culture; and an emphasis upon consumerism and the commodification of difference. (255)

According to this view, the postfeminist woman is aware of her femininity and willing to emphasize it by make up and dress; femininity is “figured as a bodily property” (Gill and Scharff 4).

This aspect is promoted by the consumerist media in particular, since they benefit from the female markets. They tell women that they have “the right to consume and display oneself to the best effect”, at the same time making women dismiss empowerment elsewhere, such as work, politics and home (Whelehan, *Overloaded* 4). Underlying this “empowerment through consumerism” is the idea that feminists have taken away from women the pleasure of the act of adornment (Whelehan, *Overloaded* 86) and wanted women to stop dressing up for men. As Whelehan shows, this is, in fact, not correct: for example Germaine Greer did not see the abandonment of make up as necessary as long as it was used to enhance one’s personality and not in order to become an acceptable female (Whelehan, *Overloaded* 87). In sum,

A consumer-based emancipated feminine identity not only rides on the notion of emancipation which originates within feminism but, at the same time, is also premised upon *emancipation from (second-wave) feminism*, as misguided and curtailing of women’s realization of their “true” feminine selves. (Lazar 49; emphasis original)

This right to adorn oneself and consume is not the only aspect of postfeminist sensibility as the right to one’s own sexuality is also a great part of postfeminist culture. This is not to say that sex positiveness is not a part of feminism, though (Whelehan, *Overloaded* 31). In the context of postfeminism, however, celebrating female sexuality is manifested on

the covers of magazines where celebrities pose sexually in little or with no clothing and in women taking pole dancing and striptease classes as allegedly fun and sexy ways to exercise. Dressing provocatively and exploiting one's sexuality and femininity are seen as acts of female empowerment and self-determination rather than as patriarchal forms of oppression and subjugation (Gentz and Brabon 91, 93). This can be problematic, though, as Imelda Whelehan demonstrates:

[i]t is not, and has never been, a question of whether individuals should have the right to use their bodies and themselves in whichever way they choose; it is not a question of whether people should or shouldn't have the freedom to enact their own sexual fantasies and desires: it is a question of who is responsible for the image which results, which in its homogenization and its predictable range of varieties suggests repression and even oppression far more than it suggests liberation. (*Overloaded* 63)

The question is, then, whether the proliferation of representations of women as desirable and sexual actors signifies a positive change in the depictions of female sexuality, or whether it is only a "postfeminist repackaging of feminist ideas in a way that renders them depoliticized and presses them into the service of patriarchal consumer capitalism" (Harvey and Gill 54).

Evolving from this emphasis on bodily self-expression and sexualized lifestyle is the need to construct and transform one's body (Press 118). The focus on the sexual body calls for constant self-improvement, which can be achieved through careful planning and self-monitoring (Gill 240). This is also a lucrative niche for the commercial domain, which

sells endless amounts of products meant to enhance a woman's sexual appeal. In the postfeminist ethos, having one's breasts surgically enhanced is an act made for oneself, not because men find bigger breasts sexually appealing (Gill 260). Rosalind Gill claims that the makeover paradigm dominates contemporary popular culture (239): appearance is essential (especially when single women want to get married), and, for example, there are many television shows that concentrate on the makeover of ordinary women (256).

All this hypersexualization and commercialism can be presented under the shield of irony: it cannot be insulting or degrading when it is used ironically, and if someone still feels insulted, it is their own fault for not "getting the joke". According to Gill, this is the way of "having it both ways"; expressing sexist sentiments in an ironized form and claiming that this was not actually "meant" (267). Therefore, "feminist responses to overtly sexualized images of women are discounted as pure prudishness" (Whelehan, *Overloaded* 81), and feminists labelled as having no sense of humor (Whelehan, *Overloaded* 5). Gill sums this sentiment effectively: "irony means never having to say you are sorry" (110).

In addition to media and popular culture, postfeminist ideologies are represented by such writers as Natasha Walter, Katie Roiphe, and Naomi Wolf. It is common to these writers that they suggest that feminism is no longer needed and that they support individual choice (Genz and Brabon 13). Next, I am going to introduce some of Wolf's ideas, since she is one of the most prominent figures of postfeminism and has received a lot of media attention.

While Wolf does not call herself a postfeminist, her books do convey a postfeminist message, even if she calls it with a different name, "power-feminism" (Wolf, *Fire* 137).

For example, in *Promiscuities*, Wolf discusses how feminism has done no justice to masculinity and what it means to many women sexual-wise (Wolf, *Promiscuities* 223). Power feminism, for Wolf, is women using the power they *already have*: women should stop shying away from power and take what they are entitled to (*Fire* 235). According to Wolf, there was a “genderquake” in 1991, an “abrupt shift in the balance of power between U.S women and men initiated by the Supreme Court confirmation hearings and the unprecedented female political activism they brought about” (*Fire* xxv). As evidence, Wolf presents legislative improvements in the United States, such as The Family Leave Act, women’s appointments to higher positions, and larger budgets for women’s health research and for the research of attacks against women (*Fire* 26-28). According to Wolf, gender equality is already here if women only stopped seeing themselves as powerless victims (*Fire* xxv).

As opposed to power feminism, Wolf situates “victim feminism”: women seeking power through an identity of powerlessness (*Fire* 135). Wolf claims that victim feminists are antisexual, self-righteous and judgemental, even fun-hating, and that their self-sacrificing and noncompetitive attitudes are in the way of women actually gaining power (*Fire* 136-137). Victim feminists see all men as evil and responsible for hierarchy: men want to dominate and they objectify women, whereas women are egalitarian, communicative and committing (Wolf, *Fire* 144). According to Imelda Whelehan, Wolf’s definition of victim feminism is in accordance with the “worst parodies of radical feminism”, and in her view, Wolf sees women’s lack of power as a weakness, not resulting from social formations (*Modern* 237).

Furthermore, Wolf argues that feminism has become alienated from ordinary women because of its outdated origins, the connecting of feminism with lesbianism, feminism's hostility towards mainstream media which has led to marginalization, and its elitism (*Fire* 66-67). Wolf sees feminism as a closed group of elitist white women who have rigid rules for being a true feminist (*Fire* 61): in popular imagination, feminism has become a "massive No to everything outside a narrow set of endorsements" (*Fire* 62). In fact, Wolf goes even so far as to compare the demand for "pure" feminist behavior to the fear of being thought of a prostitute in the old times: a woman must maintain her pure image in order not to be cast away from the society, as well as a feminist must take a "correct" side on any given issue in order to be allowed to stay in the "sisterhood" (*Fire* 111-112). This, according to Wolf, renders dissenting sounds inaudible and makes feminism immutable.

Naomi Wolf has been criticized for taking power for granted and leaving other than white and middle-class groups unconsidered; perhaps power is there to be taken for few privileged women, but what about the others (Gamble 49)? Therefore, Gamble dismisses Wolf's approach as utopian, with no practical use (49). Imelda Whelehan, on her part, in addition to criticizing Wolf for blaming women for their own oppression, argues that Wolf encourages social and political quietism among young women (*Modern* 142). This Wolf does by claiming that "old" feminism is about spoiling fun and restricting women, and by endorsing a "new" feminism that is based on liberal and elitist competition (Whelehan, *Modern* 142). Moreover, Wolf's feminism is only for the purpose of "enriching the individual's life by offering women the freedom to make personal life choices; any broader areas of social or ethical responsibility are very much marginalized" (Whelehan, *Modern* 84).

In sum, postfeminism is a broad concept, widely circulated in the media and popular culture. It can be understood as a historical or epistemological shift, as a backlash or as a sensibility; being either for or against feminism or taking a critical stance towards it. Next, I am going to put postfeminism in a larger context and compare it to New Traditionalism and third wave feminism, two concurrent but different tendencies.

2.2 Postfeminism in Context

After the terrorist attacks of 9/11, traditionalist values in the United States got new impetus as the media began to trumpet re-securing the homeland by re-securing the home (Negra 55, 53). The importance of home and family grew in the minds of people who were confused, scared and angry, and, therefore, the reaction to the attacks was linked to the recovery of traditional values (Negra 55). This recovery would, naturally, also mean the re-essentialization of gender: while men were needed for the moral leadership of the country, women were needed at home, outside of the public realm (Negra 56), just like earlier when the USA and Europe have felt their security and stability threatened. In threatening times, popular culture franchises often begin to offer fantasies of patriarchal protection (Tasker and Negra 13), as seen, for example, in blockbuster movies where the hero is always a white male who saves the world from evil. Examples of this are films such as *Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers* (2002), *The Matrix Reloaded* (2003), and *Daredevil* (2003).

In that sense, “New” Traditionalism is nothing new, as it tends to gain strength in unstable times. According to Genz and Brabon, the new traditionalist discourse idealizes women’s choice to stay at home and glorifies domestic sphere as a domain of female autonomy and independence (51-2). Housework is no longer seen as drudgery, but as a fulfilling task

and a route to female satisfaction (Genz and Brabon 58). The cooking shows of Nigella Lawson are good examples of glamorous domesticity: she is always elegant and makes cooking look enjoyable. Last year, an actress best known for her role in a television series *Gossip Girl*, Blake Lively, launched an online magazine *Preserve*, which focuses on home and traditions (*Preserve*). Lively has spoken in the media about her enthusiasm to cooking and home-making, and Wikipedia names her a “celebrity homemaker” (*Wikipedia*). In a *Vogue* interview last July, Lively says that her idol is Martha Stewart, a famous advocate of housewifery, and that her husband is the head of the family: “[h]e’s going to be a great father and leader and patriarch—he’s so meant to be all of those things” (Van Meter n.p.) Since Lively is young, only twenty-seven, and her fans are teenage girls, one may assume that she has an impact on their attitudes towards domesticity. These celebrities make their living out of home making, making traditionalism seem nostalgic and charming.

New Traditionalism can be seen as a part of postfeminist backlash, as it urges women to leave their careers and go back home where they “belong”. However, in this aspect it differs from postfeminism as a sensibility that I focus on: retreatism is not so appealing to postfeminist career women who put their independence and autonomy first. Moreover, staying at home is possible only for the privileged few, so that even if women wanted to leave their work and concentrate on perfect puddings and mangling sheets, most of them would not be able to do so.

Sometimes postfeminism is confused with third-wave feminism, which, however, is not the same thing, although the two have overlappings. Third-wave feminism is a movement consciously separating itself from second wave feminism by including women from all

ethnic backgrounds and socio-economic classes and by being more pro-sex (Harzewski 152). It emerged in the 1990s, advocated by young women who were born during the second wave and, having grown up with feminism, have a different orientation to it (Genz and Brabon 156-158). Third-wave feminists see themselves as a new generation of feminists, their work founded on second-wave principles but distinguished by political and cultural differences (Genz and Brabon 156). Therefore, third-wavers' attitude to feminism is *generational*: women nowadays are more likely to identify with their generation rather than their gender, and thus they want a movement that speaks directly to their generation (Budgeon 280). Adopting the epithet *third* implies that for the third-wave feminists feminism has a historical trajectory, beginning from the first wave in the turn of the 20th century, moving on to the second wave in the 1960s and 1970s and then to the third wave (Genz and Brabon 157).

One of the key differences between postfeminism and third wave feminism is their standpoint on feminism. While postfeminist discourse asserts that gender equality is already a given and focuses on female achievement through individualism and self-expression, third wave feminists argue that feminism continues to be “an active and important force in contemporary society”, only its agendas and ways of presentations may have diversified (Budgeon 281). They acknowledge that the loss of a unified subject “woman” does pose a challenge to feminism, but attempt to rethink gender from a perspective that could still be named feminist (Budgeon 281).

Moreover, third-wave feminism is often seen as a scholarly category while postfeminism is deemed a popular idiom. Justifying this segregation is the fact that third-wave feminism is a self-identified term, and its advocates use it to differentiate themselves from other

feminist movements, whereas postfeminism is more of a tag provided by popular media (Tasker and Negra 19). Third-wave feminism wants to differentiate itself from postfeminism which it sees as a conservative and patriarchal discourse that seeks to undermine feminism. By contrast, third wave feminists define themselves as a political movement with strong affiliations to second-wave feminism (Genz and Brabon 156).

However, there are overlaps between third-wave feminism and postfeminism since postfeminism is more than just a backlash. Most importantly, they both challenge the second wave feminism's anti-feminine and anti-popular agenda by reasserting female sexuality and by engaging with the media and locating themselves within popular culture (Genz and Brabon 161-62). They celebrate femininity and enjoy the consumption of feminine products without feeling that they are being subordinated (McRobbie 157). Moreover, both third wave feminism and postfeminism "explore twenty-first-century configurations of female empowerment and re-examine the meanings of feminism in the present context as a politics of contradiction and ambivalence" (Genz and Brabon 162). Shortly put, they both differentiate themselves from second wave feminism: while third wave feminists appreciate the legacy of feminists before them, postfeminists reject second wave feminism altogether as outdated and rigid.

In conclusion, the advocates of New Traditionalism glamorize home-making and "nesting" and they see homework as a recreational activity. It could be said that New Traditionalism is anti-feminist, as it sort of revokes the feminist battles won when it urges women to stay at home and cherish the hearth and family values. Third wave feminism, however, credits feminism for the rights women already have and see the process as still

on-going. Next, I am going to describe how postfeminism runs through contemporary popular culture by giving examples of celebrities, television shows and popular fiction.

2.3 Postfeminism in Popular Culture

In the context of popular culture, postfeminism in the 1990s meant Girl Power as represented by Spice Girls and Madonna's *Girlie Show* tour, *Xena the Warrior Princess* and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* to name a few. The media began to talk about the new generation of "can-do girls", who, after decades of feminist battles, were in a better position to educate themselves and make career than previous generations. For these girls, friendships were everything and the world open (*BBC, You've come a long way n.p.*)

Telling of the present-day postfeminist popular culture are the female celebrities who refuse to be called feminists. For example, the singer Katy Perry, upon accepting the *Billboard Award for Woman of the Year*, said that she is not a feminist, although she does believe in the strength of women (Davies n.p.). The singer Meghan Trainor, too, has told the press that she does not consider herself a feminist (Hampp n.p.), as have Geri Halliwell (Moorhead n.p.), Juliette Binoche (Barnett n.p.) and Carla Bruni (Alexander n.p.), to name but a few. In the words of Geri Halliwell, "[f]or me feminism is bra-burning lesbianism. It's very unglamorous. I'd like to see it rebranded. We need to see a celebration of our femininity and softness" (Moorhead n.p.). It seems that these celebrities are afraid of being labelled as feminists because that would somehow diminish their appeal to the general audience. They do, however, celebrate the strength of women and their *soft femininity*.

In addition to these female celebrities who outright deny being feminists, others label themselves as feminists mostly because as women they are now allowed to be sexual and do what they want. “I feel like I’m one of the biggest feminists in the world because I tell women to not be scared of anything,” said the singer Miley Cyrus (Butterly), who is renowned for twerking against male dancers on stage wearing practically nothing. In the postfeminist culture, “[t]here’s absolutely no contradiction at all between being a feminist and taking your clothes off and being comfortable about displaying your sexuality [...] [s]he (Miley Cyrus) is using it for her own purposes, she’s increasing her fan base, she’s making a lot of money, she’s doing what she wants to do” (Silverman).

So, for these postfeminist women (or modern-day feminists as Beyoncé calls herself), women’s rights are an individual matter, and the celebratory attitude to what rights these privileged women have takes the focus away from the more severe issues such as unequal pay at work and the intersection of racism and sexism (Projansky 79). In other words, postfeminist popular culture embraces the victories won by feminists but at the same time, they refuse the title “feminist” as old-fashioned, boring, frigid and man-hating. It is a self-protecting strategy (Faludi 80). Moreover, the “feminist icons” such as Miley Cyrus and Beyoncé are so named only because they have succeeded in the entertainment business as sexy women – they show other women what sexy femininity can achieve, and their actual talent is left to the back seat. According to Whelehan, it is lamentable that the image of the successful woman increasingly correlates with the sexy one (*Overloaded* 63).

One of the key texts of postfeminist popular culture is Helen Fielding’s *Bridget Jones’s Diary* (1996). It is a diary of a thirty-something singleton woman Bridget, who is almost

desperate in her search for the one true love. According to Imelda Whelehan, Bridget expresses the tensions of women who recognize the rhetoric of empowerment and yet find it difficult to relate it to their search for the perfect Austenian hero: “[h]aving a career is all well and good, but not if it is at the expense of finding Mr. Right” (*Overloaded* 136). It is specifically this ambivalence towards feminism that makes Bridget so postfeminist; she is aware of the feminist values which she situates somewhere in the past, but which still exist to her as an uneasy conscience as a woman more comfortable with the idea of sexual difference (Whelehan, *Overloaded* 137). Whelehan talks about a “Bridget Jones effect”, which is the legitimation of measuring one’s inadequacies through the body; that is, seeking control through self-monitoring when struggling with one’s femininity (*Overloaded* 141).

Rosalind Gill sees *Bridget Jones* as a rupture with earlier forms of romantic fiction and the pioneer of chick lit genre (227). According to Gill, Bridget has become a “recognizable emblem of a particular kind of femininity, a constructed point of identification for all women”, which is a part of the book’s success and which made Bridget a representative of the zeitgeist (227). As well as Whelehan, Gill, too, notes the aspect of self-surveillance in *Bridget Jones’s Diary*, and argues that it is even more striking in the film version of the book: the fact that the actress Renee Zellweger gained weight for the role got a lot of attention in the media, as did her subsequent weight loss (229-30). Moreover, Gill claims that whiteness and heterosexuality are unmarked and naturalized in the book, going unchallenged despite a Latin and a gay minor characters (231-33).

Furthermore, Stephanie Harzewski calls *Bridget Jones's Diary* a “mock bildungsroman” as Bridget constantly aspires for self-improvement and tracks down her goals, only to fail comically (62). Anthea Taylor, on her part, has studied the singledom in *Bridget Jones*, and how Bridget continues to “mediate public constructions of women’s singleness” even to this day (72). Taylor argues that contrary to previous criticism claiming that *Bridget Jones's Diary* idealizes heterosexual matrimony, it actually does not glorify romance, as it shows realistic ambivalence towards marriage: married people are not always happy and they may even be jealous of the “singletons” (73, 91).

In addition to *Bridget Jones*, television shows such as *Ally McBeal* (1997-2002) and *Sex and the City* (1998-2004) focus on single career women and their relationships to the other sex. More recent examples include *The Mindy Project* (2012-) and *30 Rock* (2006-2013). Common to all these shows is that they depict lives of professional women (Ally is a lawyer, *SATC* characters are a columnist, a lawyer, a gallerist and a PR-manager, Mindy is an obstetrician/gynecologist, and Liz Lemon, the main character in *30 Rock*, is a screenwriter) and, especially, their messy relationships that never seem to work. The postfeminist message of these shows seems to be that if a woman wants a career and have fun when she is still young, she will end up alone in her thirties, desperate to find a man to have a family with. So, although these series celebrate female power through the depiction of the characters’ professional success, they are undermined by the same women being emotional messes (Whelehan, *Overloaded* 139).

What is more, all these shows are strikingly white, middle-class and heterosexual. The only exception is Mindy Lahiri, the main character of *The Mindy Project*, who is of Indian origin. However, the show has been criticized for whiteness, since Lahiri is the only non-

white character and she only dates white men (Bailey n.p.). Moreover, all the characters are slim and conventionally beautiful, showcasing how, in order to succeed as a professional woman, one has to be slim and pretty. Even Liz Lemon, who is showed eating constantly unhealthy foods, is skinny.

In other words, postfeminist popular culture presents us with white, skinny, thirty-something professional women whose troubles center upon sex and finding a man. Most of these women obsess about dieting and shopping. Like Bridget Jones, they find themselves endlessly in need of self-improvement – mostly because they want to get married before it is too late. An integral part of getting married is to renounce feminism so as to not seem like an angry lesbian, and so many women do, celebrities in front. Although postfeminism claims to celebrate female sexuality for the sake of women themselves, it often seems that the validation of being sexy needs to come from men anyway.

3. Analysis

In this chapter, I will present a critical reading of the *Fifty Shades*. I will connect the trilogy to the genres of popular fiction and romance fiction and show how it is, essentially, a conservative romance. The story's conservativeness is evidenced by, for example, the difference between genders in regard to sexuality: good women are sexually inexperienced, while men can be good regardless of their sexual experience. Then I am going to demonstrate how the ideologies of postfeminism are mediated and reinforced in the *Fifty Shades*.

3.1 Features of Popular Fiction and the Romance in *Fifty Shades*

The *Fifty Shades* trilogy is a good example of the romance fiction genre, and next I am going to describe the features that connect it to popular romance fiction. Firstly, *Fifty Shades* is literally *popular* fiction, as the trilogy has sold over a hundred million worldwide and it has been translated into 51 languages (Flood, “*Fifty Shades of Grey* trilogy” n.p.). The discussion around the books has still not ceased, as the fans are looking forward to the upcoming movie based on the trilogy. Moreover, the writer E.L. James surely is media friendly, as Gelder claims popular fiction writers to be. She might have appeared to shy away from fame and publicity in her first interviews (*ABC News*, for example), however, she has continued to appear in numerous events and interviews. This is natural, as fans are very important to James since it was them who raised her books into success. James, too, has her own homepage for notifications and frequently asked questions, though she has been publishing new blog texts rather rarely lately (*Homepage* n.p.)

Resembling the case of another popular fiction series, *Twilight* by Stephanie Meyer, it is no surprise that the *Fifty Shades* is written along the conventions of popular fiction and romance. It must be admitted, though, that due to its massive success the *Fifty Shades* has become more than just a representative of its genre, as it is sold rather as “the book,” and every reader knows the name of the writer. However, the reading experience of the *Fifty Shades* trilogy does not differ from generic popular fiction: it is consumed quickly and with little intellectual effort. As I am going to take a closer look at the language of the trilogy in the romance section, it suffices now to say that it is simple enough for even those readers who do not like to read literary fiction because of its complexity.

The *Fifty Shades* trilogy is, in essence, popular fiction at its purest: it is very popular, very commercialized, and fan-based. More specifically, though, it belongs to the romance genre with its insecure but beautiful heroine and powerful but sensitive hero. The trilogy contains an age-old story of a pure heroine who heals the wounded hero through her unconditional love, finishing with the happy ending. Romance has been criticized for being patriarchal and conservative, and the same could be said about the *Fifty Shades*. Next, I am going to show how the romance fiction conventions apply to the trilogy.

Anastasia Steele, the protagonist and first-person narrator of the *Fifty Shades* trilogy, is a perfect example of a heroine of a romance. To begin with, she is innocent to the point that she has never been infatuated with anyone:

I’m missing the need-a-boyfriend gene, but the truth is I just haven’t met anyone who ... well, whom I’m attracted to [...] Sometimes I wonder if there’s something wrong with me. (*Grey* 24)

Neither has she ever masturbated or even had sexual feelings, so that until meeting Christian Ana is unaware of what desire feels like (*Grey* 68) and admits that she does not even know what “pleasuring oneself” means (*Grey* 114). As Radway observed in her study of romance heroines (126), Ana is completely unaware that she is even capable of passionate sexual urges, and realizes that only when Christian arouses those feelings in her. Moreover, Ana is, naturally, a virgin when she meets Christian Grey, a fact that makes Christian immediately regret his suggestion to have a bdsm relationship with her: “I knew you were inexperienced, but a *virgin!* [...] May God forgive me” (*Grey* 109; emphasis original). Ana’s virginity shows Christian that she is a pure, innocent, virtuous woman, and that it is morally wrong of Christian to lure her into his “dark path”.

A further illustration of Ana’s childlike innocence and inexperience is the fact that she does not have an e-mail address (*Grey* 178), although she graduates from college in the 2010s. She has no experience on alcohol or partying: “It’s Friday, and we shall be celebrating tonight, really celebrating. I might even get drunk! I’ve never been drunk before” (*Grey* 53-54). Furthermore, Ana uses euphemisms to describe genitals, such as “there” (*Grey* 114), “my sex” (*Darker* 153), and “his impressive length” (*Grey* 349), for example. The following is a good example of her prudishness:

“Kiss me,” I whisper.

“Where?”

“You know where.”

“Where?”

Oh, he's taking no prisoners. Embarrassed, I quickly point at the apex of my thighs, and he grins wickedly. I close my eyes, mortified. (*Darker* 67)

So, Ana is "mortified" to talk about her sexual desires, and she is too embarrassed to say anything aloud, so she only points to the spot she wishes to be kissed. This kind of innocence makes Ana a perfect love interest for a romance hero, as she contrasts the hero's experience and differs from the women the hero has had affairs with. Christian has had sexual relations with professional submissives only: that is, with women who are very experienced and educated on bdsm and who have signed a contract on what they do and what they do not do. The obvious appeal of Ana to Christian is her complete ignorance and inexperience.

Moreover, like romance heroines typically (Radway 126), Ana is unaware of her beauty, and when Christian tells her that she is beautiful, she thinks he must be farsighted (*Grey* 109). According to Radway, the heroine's beauty is linked with sexuality: it is the reason why the hero is attracted to her and cannot keep away from her, and it also serves as a sign to both the hero and the reader that the heroine is a sexual being, despite her innocence (126-7). What is more, Ana has a "mane" of brown hair that is uncontrollable and "wayward", impossible to brush "into submission" (*Grey* 3). This, according to Belsey, is evidence of sensuality, as unruly hair is seen to be full of vitality (21). In the context of *Fifty Shades*, Ana's hair also symbolizes her resistance to submission. Like her hair, Ana is sensual and vital, refusing to be subordinated by Christian. In addition to her ignorance and innocence, Ana is also clumsy and insecure, features which make her a character for many a reader to identify with.

If Ana is a perfect illustration of a romantic heroine, so is Christian Grey of a romantic hero. First of all, his good looks and self-confident masculinity are beyond comparison, as every female character he meets in the trilogy is bedazzled by him. The trilogy contains many passages where Christian's physical perfection is admired and described, for example: "[h]e has a physique drawn on classical lines: broad muscular shoulders, narrow hips, the inverted triangle" (James, *Darker* 76) and "[h]e's not merely good-looking – he's the epitome of male beauty, breathtaking" (James, *Grey* 25). In short, his body is eroticized throughout. Furthermore, Christian has immense wealth and power, which makes him a financially good match for the younger and poorer heroine. In *Fifty Shades*, the heroine indeed is slender and nervous, passive and emotional, while the hero is muscular and powerful, active and controlling: this maximizing of gender difference serves to eroticize the relationship between the two. In effect, Christian and Ana play the archetypal roles of a conservative romance.

As in romance fiction in general, the hero in *Fifty Shades* has a past of multiple lovers, including Mrs. Robinson, the older woman who taught Christian bdsm, and the subsequent fifteen submissives. Christian's sexual experience is in stark contrast with Ana's complete non-experience; however, it is made tolerable for Ana because Christian has never loved anyone he has been with, and has never had an actual romantic relationship with a woman. Therefore, Ana is his first girlfriend and the first woman he has ever romantically loved, which is consistent with romantic idealism. What is more, Christian has always treated his submissives well and only had one at a time: Christian is not the kind of ladies' man who would collect one-night stands. This further implicates that he is, at his heart, a good man and worthy of a good woman's love.

Moreover, Ana has the privilege to see Christian's vulnerability underneath his domineering attitude and hard exterior, which makes her believe, like every romance heroine before her, that all he needs is the love of a good woman in order to give up his "dark path" of bdsm (*Grey* 102). Christian's vulnerability is caused by his "crack-whore" mother, who died when he was four (*Grey* 367). The trauma of having been left alone with the dead mother for four days (*Darker* 37) is used as an explanation for Christian's unpredictable mood swings and his cold, dominating attitude towards his employees, as well as his pursuit of feeding the world's poor by investing in new technologies of farming in third world countries. The traumatic experience has rendered him incapable of loving, nor can he bear anyone touching him physically. According to Radway, this initial description of Christian as cold and dominating, but at the same time caring for other people (that is, his investments in third world countries) makes his subsequent transformation into a devoted husband and father believable to the reader (129).

Christian's vulnerability makes Ana willing to "heal" him (*Freed* 259). The following sentence could be from any classic romance: "I always think of Christian as strong and dominating – yet the reality is he's so fragile, my lost boy" (*Freed* 264). "Lost boy" is a familiar term from *Peter Pan*, referring to the boys living in Neverland who never seem to grow up. The boys have ended up in Neverland because they have fallen out of their prams and Peter has saved them from the fairies (Kavey 93). Christian can also be seen as a lost boy, since his mother did not take care of him and since he has stayed emotionally adolescent: "Emotionally, Christian is an adolescent, Ana. He bypassed that phase in his life totally. [...] His emotional world has to play catch-up," says Christian's therapist (*Darker* 414). Ana herself thinks this:

The image of a powerful man who's really still a little boy, who was horrifically abused and neglected, who feels unworthy of love from his perfect family and his much-less-than-perfect girlfriend ... my lost boy ... it's heartbreaking. (*Darker* 322)

However, Ana's love and the fact that Christian becomes a father do heal this "lost boy" and, in the end, he is lost no more.

In addition to stereotypical hero and heroine, eroticism, so common in romance fiction, is a significant part of the *Fifty Shades*, as well. As I am going to discuss the trilogy's eroticism further in the next section that is about postfeminism ideologies, this section concentrates on the specific romantic features. Eroticism in a romance is based on the maximization of gender difference, and this can also be seen in the *Fifty Shades*. Christian is the epitome of masculinity: muscular, well-endowed, powerful, strong and experienced, while Ana is slender, innocent and delicate. Ana responds to Christian's desire by submitting to his will, even when she does not want to do so (*Grey* 192; *Darker* 342): her utmost desire is to please Christian.

However, the eroticism in the *Fifty Shades* can also be interpreted as a desire for wealth and social status, as suggested by Cranny-Francis, since Ana gains plenty of them both when she marries Christian. The books satisfy readers' economic desires because Christian's wealth is displayed in every turn. Moreover, being the virtuous girl that Ana is, she feels uncomfortable when Christian lavishes his riches to her, and she protests when he buys her very expensive gifts. For example, when Ana is uncomfortable to accept an Audi that Christian has bought her, they have this discussion:

“Anastasia, do you have any idea how much money I make?”

I flush. “Why should I? I don’t need to know the bottom line of your bank account, Christian.”

His eyes soften. “I know. That’s one of the things I love about you.” (*Darker* 109)

It is very embarrassing for her when Christian’s father Carrick demands that Christian have a prenuptial agreement, and she is afraid that everybody will think she is a gold digger (*Freed* 31). However, Christian knows that Ana is not after him for money, and, therefore, it is only right that she should enjoy his riches. Like in the fairytale of Cinderella, where the greedy stepsisters do not deserve the prince, but the virtuous, altruistic Cinderella does.

The patriarchal power roles are in operation in the *Fifty Shades* even without the dominant/submissive casting. It is Christian who controls Ana, although she sometimes “defies” his will and makes him angry. He constantly talks about “owning” Ana: “[y]ou’re mine, Anastasia” (*Darker* 271), “I am just protecting what is mine [Ana]” (*Darker* 260), “I want everyone to know that you’re mine” (*Freed* 145). In accordance with romance tradition, Christian’s obsession to control Ana is justified to the readers by “he loves me, and he wants to protect me” (*Darker* 230). Being over protective is Christian’s way of loving, as Ana convinces herself and as the readers are wanted to believe. Thus, in the words of Shachar,

the most compelling form of backlash against feminism [...] a distinct “postfeminist” approach which utilizes the rhetoric of women “having it all”

(happiness, true love, a loving partner, fulfillment, belonging, money, security, “power,”) with a deeply conservative politics that suggests “having it all” actually means retreating back to traditional notions of femininity. (155)

When woman submits to man’s power and control, she can have it all. This is what happens to Ana: she submits to Christian’s will, giving him her body and soul, and so she has the prince, social status, security, and happiness.

A further example on patriarchal power is rape, which is a part of the *Fifty Shades*, too. Rape is a common convention in romance fiction, according to Radway, and it is tolerated in certain circumstances. Such is also the case with the *Fifty Shades*. There is a threat of rape by Ana’s good friend José who does not understand his limits and tries to abuse the drunken Ana, and then there is an actual rape by Christian. Christian also admits to having rape fantasies and wanting to realize those fantasies with Ana. The sexual harassment by José and his difficulty to understand Ana’s “no” is made forgivable to Ana and the reader by the excuse of “he is so drunk and he finds Ana so irresistible that he just cannot help himself” (*Grey* 59). According to Radway’s findings, this is a common and tolerated excuse in romance fiction (141).

The actual rape by Christian, however, is justified by Ana finding physical pleasure in it, although afterwards she feels sad and confused. The scene begins when Ana sends Christian an email to tell him to keep away from her, because she is not going to be his submissive. It is meant as a joke, however, Christian takes it seriously and appears in her house. Seeing Christian in her room, Ana tries to find an escape route because she is afraid of him. “I thought I should come and remind you how *nice* it was knowing me”, Christian

says and ties Ana to her bed, although she protests and says no. Once again, Ana's "no" is not respected, as Christian says: "If you struggle, I'll tie your feet, too. If you make a noise, Anastasia, I will gag you" (*Grey* 192; emphasis original). After sex, Christian leaves, and Ana feels like "an empty vessel to be filled at his whim" (*Grey* 199).

Furthermore, Christian has rape fantasies that Ana does not share with him, but submits to them anyway:

"[S]ubduing you in bed is a fantasy of mine." [...]

"I thought you subdued me all the time." [...]

"[B]ut I'd like some resistance."

"So I'm supposed to be unwilling?" [...]

"Yes." (*Freed* 312-14)

Ana then agrees to play along: "I twist and writhe, trying to free myself from his merciless hold, but it's hopeless. He's much stronger than me" (*Freed* 315). Having Ana always submit to all his desires is not good enough for Christian, after all, as that does not give him the satisfaction of having conquered anything. Therefore, he fantasizes about raping Ana, having her struggle and deny him, so that when he succeeds to penetrate her, it is the ultimate victory of his power and masculinity.

The ending of the trilogy is the "happily-ever-after" familiar from fairytales. There is a time-leap of two years, showing Christian and Ana living happily in their new, luxurious home with their toddler boy, expecting another child. Christian is still tempting Ana to leave her job and stay at home, "barefoot and pregnant in my kitchen" (*Freed* 541), which

Ana refuses since Christian has bought her a company of her own to manage. This paragraph shows effectively the tension that postfeminist women feel between family life and work: on one hand, they want splendid careers, but on the other hand, they would love the possibility to stay at home. With a husband as obscenely rich as Christian, it would be possible without a guilty conscience. Therefore, it is part of the fantasy to have the chance to not work and just spend money as one wishes.

The utopian ending continues by letting the reader know that Christian's housekeeper Mrs. Jones and security guard Taylor have got married, as have Christian's brother Elliot with Ana's best friend Kate. Elliot and Kate have a baby daughter, and Taylor's daughter from his previous marriage spends time at Ana and Christian's, although she was not present in the trilogy previously. Moreover, Christian is no longer jealous at Ana's friend José, who is invited to their son's birthday party with his father (*Freed* 547). Harmonious family life, a grand manor house, close friends and, naturally, a perfect sex life are what constitutes the complete happiness of Ana and Christian.

The language in the trilogy is in accordance with the conventions of popular fiction and romance, as it is very simple, colloquial and descriptive. Written in an everyday language, readers who do not read otherwise and who are not used to reading literature, can easily follow the story. The text is there to convey a series of events that happen in the lives of the protagonists, and it serves only to put the events into words; it does not demand interpretation or careful reading. In fact, James's writing is so detailed that the reader hardly needs any imagination at all: "I skip to the freezer and find the French bread cut to size in Ziploc bags. I place two of them on a plate, pop them in the microwave, and set it to defrost" (*Freed* 130). Nor is interpretation needed, as, for example, every comment

meant to be sarcastic is told to the reader to be so, and if the reader does not realize from what they are reading that the moment is erotic, they will when it is plainly told them: “‘Really? A controlling man, surely a mythical creature?’ I don’t think I can squeeze anymore sarcasm into my response” (*Darker* 102); “His tone is ironic” (*Darker* 118); “This is so – erotic” (*Freed* 398). As everything is explained, there is no risk of misunderstanding.

In conclusion, the *Fifty Shades* is a very popular romance fiction trilogy that tells the story familiar from many other romances: heroine finds her hero and they overcome the obstacles in their love’s way. According to the conventions of romance, gender difference is emphasized and eroticized in the trilogy, especially in the characters of the hero and the heroine, Christian and Ana. Furthermore, the trilogy eroticizes power, wealth, and social status and links sexuality to a heterosexual marriage. In romances, it is the man who has the power, wealth, and social status, and the *Fifty Shades* makes no exception. In fact, the trilogy emphasizes man’s power and control over woman as Christian is a dominant and a “control-freak”. Moreover, although Ana loses her virginity to Christian before they have even talked about love, they do marry in a couple of months and have their children in matrimony. And, like most romance fiction, the *Fifty Shades* ends in love and happy family life where all the obstacles and insecurities have been overcome.

3.2 Ideologies of Postfeminism in *Fifty Shades*

In this part of the analysis, I am going to discuss the ideologies of postfeminism that can be found in the *Fifty Shades* trilogy. I will begin with the most widely discussed aspects of the trilogy, eroticism and sexuality, and move on to the postfeminist gender ideologies as depicted in the series. I am going to show that the trilogy’s understanding of gender

and sex is conservative, despite the fact that series has been marketed as empowering to women. Furthermore, I am going to examine the postfeminist obsession with the sexualized body and consumption as it appears in the books.

When it comes to its eroticism, the *Fifty Shades* trilogy can be seen as pornographic: it has plenty of sex scenes with the two main characters, the purpose of which is to excite the reader. Allegedly, it is the main reason why the trilogy received so much publicity and became so popular. E. L. James herself has said that she only wrote down her own sexual fantasies (*ABC News*), but it seems that they are the fantasies of many other women (and men), too. The sex scenes are graphic (although genitalia are never referred to by using their actual names), to the point that condoms are never forgotten and every physical movement of the characters is described. The following paragraphs are examples of the kinds of sex scenes the *Fifty Shades* offers:

He sits up, grasps the hem of my jeans, and tugs them off, followed by my panties. Keeping his eyes fixed on mine, he stands, takes a foil packet out of his pocket, and tosses it at me, then removes his jeans and boxers in one swift motion. I rip the packet open greedily, and when he lies beside me again, I slowly roll the condom onto him. (*Darker* 121)

“I want you to become well acquainted, on first name terms if you will, with my favourite and most cherished part of my body. I’m very attached to this.” *It’s so big and growing*. His erection is above the water line [...] I reach forward and place one of my hands around him, mirroring how he’s holding himself. His eyes close briefly. Wow... feels much firmer than I expected. I squeeze, and he places his hand

over mine. “Like this,” he whispers, and he moves his hand up and down with a firm grip around my fingers. (*Grey* 136; emphasis original)

Perhaps it is because of this that Eva Illouz in her study *Hardcore Romance* calls *Fifty Shades* self-help, as it offers techniques that can be directly incorporated into one’s sexual life (locations 375 and 364).

Despite its numerous descriptions of sexual intercourse between the two main characters, the trilogy has, however, a conservative ideology. First of all, it is markedly heterosexual and patriarchal, secondly, promiscuity is condemned as marital sex (or sex with the promise of marriage) is elevated to the highest status. Next, I am going to take a look at the conservative sexualities *Fifty Shades* produces.

Ana is positioned in the traditional feminine role by being an inexperienced virgin, and by willing to please Christian: she submits to anything Christian suggests or does during their intercourses, whether she actually wants it or not. She gives up the control of her body to her dominating and experienced master, who is the representative of male power. With the description of bdsm practices that Christian uses with Ana in the trilogy, such as strapping and roping her so that she cannot move, blindfolding her and whipping and spanking, the domination of a man over a frail woman is effectively underlined. The attitude of “keeping women in their place” is clearly shown in Christian’s remarks such as “This should keep you in place. [...] I must say I like this harness on you” (*Darker* 16) and, when he interrupts Ana’s day at work: “I’m just looking over my assets. [...] I like to make the odd impromptu visit. It keeps management on their toes, wives in their place”

(*Freed* 143-4). Therefore, the patriarchal roles of the feminine woman and the masculine man go unchallenged in the trilogy.

There are instances when Ana enjoys being subordinated and all the “kinky stuff”; however, she feels guilty of the sexual pleasure: for example, when they use butt plugs, Ana feels like she is doing something forbidden (*Freed* 117). Moreover, after having had sex with Christian multiple times, Ana’s “subconscious” mocks her for looking in the mirror and expecting to see horns and a little pointy tail (*Grey* 360). It is, of course, the devil that has horns and a pointy tail: and women having sex with devil are witches, seduced to sin by him (Roper 84). It is never articulated clearly in the trilogy what exactly it is that is so “dark” about bdsm, although there are plenty of references to the darkness and Ana imagines herself as bringing Christian back to light. Furthermore, Ana seems to have internalized the whore discourse as her “subconscious” repeatedly calls her such, especially when she receives gifts from Christian. Then, there are instances when Ana does not enjoy being used as a submissive without her consent. The text uses words such as “assault”, “battery”, “attack” and so on, and Ana feels “demeaned, debased, and abused” (*Grey* 292). Thus, despite its reputation as sexually liberating, the trilogy does produce an image where certain kinds of sexual practices are immoral and “deviant” while others are enjoyable and acceptable.

However, as the story progresses, Ana ceases to feel guilty of her pleasures, and she also makes clear to Christian that she will not tolerate demeaning punishments anymore. This could be seen as a victory of the postfeminist celebratory attitude to female sexuality: firstly, that having sex outside marriage is not equal to being a prostitute and that sexual pleasure should not induce guilt, and secondly, that a woman ought to stand her ground

on what is acceptable and what is not. In this way, the story provides a positive message, but it succeeds only because Christian is a man capable of change. In real life, men who like to batter and attack their girlfriends for punishment and for their own sexual pleasure hardly change just because a good woman loves them.

Furthermore, *Fifty Shades* does nothing to challenge hegemonic heterosexuality: the only homosexual character in the trilogy is Franco, Ana's hairdresser, who appears for a brief moment in the *Fifty Shades Darker*. His character is a caricature of a stereotypical homosexual hairdresser with a fake accent and overenthusiastic manners (*Darker* 106). Furthermore, when Ana interviews Christian during their first meet, she asks whether he is gay. This question is on the list Ana's friend Kate has compiled for the interview, and she reads it aloud without thinking, feeling "mortified" the moment she realizes what she has said (*Grey* 13). Christian's reaction to the question is, too, telling of the "shamefulness" of being homosexual: "[h]ow dare she! I have to fight down the urge to drag her out of her seat, bend her across my knee, and spank the living shit out of her" (*Freed* 565; emphasis original). Later, Ana marvels at "the ridiculousness of Christian's being gay" (*Freed* 280). Homosexuality is seen, then, as a shameful but distant issue: homosexuals are Others, and somewhat ridiculous and funny. The implication is that manly men cannot be homosexual, and even insinuating it is insulting. Homosexuality exists, but it is only for the feminine men who put on an act and make it into camp.

Moreover, satisfying sex is only present in loving relationships that have the possibility of a marriage. For example, Ana's friend Kate is told to have had two one-night stands in her life, both of which have led to a heartache (*Grey* 71), and when Ana hears that Christian's brother Elliot has "fucked most of Seattle", she is shocked (*Freed* 279) and

begins to call him “manwhore” in her mind (*Freed* 287). Moreover, Christian’s dominant past is depicted as darkness and himself as a “freaky sadist” (*Grey* 99), dangerous (*Grey* 101), and a monster (*Grey* 102). The only valid form of sexuality is heterosexual monogamy, sealed with marriage vows. So, when Ana loses her virginity to Christian, her “subconscious” scolds her for giving her virginity to a man who does not love her (*Grey* 126). However, Christian and Ana marry very quickly, after having known each other for only a couple of months, making Ana an “honorable” woman (*Freed* 6). Marriage is, in all, shown as *sexy*, as Ana admires her “hot husband” (*Freed* 5), and wedding rings are erotic, because they brand the person as belonging to someone (*Freed* 394).

Yet another aspect of conservatism in the trilogy is its attitude to abortion. When Ana finds out that she is pregnant, she is terrified of the idea of having a baby at that point in their lives. However, when the possibility of abortion enters her mind, she quickly shakes the “alarming” thought out of her head, frightened of the “dark path” her thoughts are leading her (*Freed* 413). Calling abortion “dark” sends the reader a message that abortion is unacceptable and wrong. Perhaps this has not been E. L. James’s intention; however, having Ana’s doctor straightaway congratulate her on the pregnancy, prescribe prenatal vitamins, and calculate due date, is suspicious for a professional. Abortion is legal in Seattle, so one would think that in the 2010s an obstetrician/gynecologist would be more discreet about it, inquiring whether the baby is welcome or not, and discussing options.

Furthermore, the representation of gender in the *Fifty Shades* follows the lines “men are from Mars, women are from Venus”, an attitude familiar from 1990’s popular books by Deborah Tannen and John Gray, *You Just Don’t Understand: Women and Men in*

Conversation and *Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus*, respectively. These bestselling works assert that genders are different, and men and women find difficulties in understanding each other specifically because of these differences. In the *Fifty Shades*, gender difference is also taken as a given, as, for example, expressed by Christian's sister Mia: "[g]irls, shopping – boys, outdoor boring stuff" (*Freed* 281) and by Christian himself, who presents Ana what she can get in his beauty salons: "all that stuff that women like" (*Darker* 92). Moreover, the people who cook in the series are always women, and Christian does not even know how to chop vegetables. Although there are women in different professions, such as doctors, architects, and security persons, the *essence* of the patriarchal gender division remains.

According to postfeminist ideologies, men are masculine and women feminine, no matter what achievements in gender equality has been won; that is, although equal, genders are different and it is alright to emphasize and even celebrate the differences. Women are "allowed" to enjoy feminine things such as shopping and make up and beauty treatments without having the guilty conscience of the second wave feminists. This ideology seems to be self-evident in the trilogy. For example, when Kate and Christian's sister Mia take Ana shopping and convince her to buy a very short dress and high heels in order to charm Christian at a club that night, Ana feels uneasy paying so much for a clubbing outfit because it is Christian's money and not hers, not because wearing sexy clothes for a man could be considered demeaning for women (*Freed* 283-4).

So, the postfeminist obsession with the body and outward appearances is clearly seen in the *Fifty Shades*, especially as the writer describes every character's appearances in detail. Careful descriptions of characters' appearances are a feature familiar from romance fiction; however, in the *Fifty Shades* this feature can also be connected to postfeminism

and how essential the appearance is. Hair, clothing style and body shape are important, and what is more, everybody seems to be attractive. For example, Ana's best friend Kate is described as "even ill she looks gamine and gorgeous, strawberry blond hair in place and green eyes bright" (*Grey* 3-4), and her male friend José is "tall, and in his jeans and T-shirt, he's all shoulders and muscles, tanned skin, dark hair, and burning dark eyes. Yes, José's pretty hot" (*Grey* 24). There are no obese or ugly characters in the trilogy.

Not only are the main characters' looks minutely described, so are also those of minor characters. Every time a new character appears, be it a waitress at a restaurant or a receptionist, their appearance and clothes are described in detail; for example, a neighbor whom Christian and Ana meet only for the once they are at the elevator at the same time, is described as "young, casually dressed, with long, layered, dark hair. He looks like he works in the media. [...] He has kind, soft brown eyes" (*Freed* 108). This is the kind of information that the reader does not actually need, since the character is there only to give an example of how men are attracted to Ana despite her own protestations to the contrary, and since he is present only for a paragraph. Furthermore, Ana's gynecologist Dr. Greene is "tall, blond, and immaculate, dressed in a royal-blue suit. I'm reminded of the women who work in Christian's office. She's like an identikit model – another Stepford blonde" (*Grey* 314). The world of *Fifty Shades* is made of fit and beautiful people.

Moreover, people's bodies are to be looked at and objectified, whether it be a man or a woman. Christian is looked through Ana's objectifying gaze: "I watch the flex and pull of the muscles of his back under his T-shirt as he changes the song" (*Freed* 397); "[h]e has such an attractive back – broad, sculptured shoulders, all the small muscles clearly defined" (*Darker* 199). In accordance with postfeminist ideas, it is acceptable for women

to objectify men since men have been objectifying women for so long: “sexual objectification of men is supposed to pass for sexual self-determination” (Whelehan *Overloaded* 9). In romance fiction, woman becomes the subject and man the object, and thus, Assiter calls romances “pornography for women” (121). The *Fifty Shades* is no exception, although women are objectified in it, too: Ana, for example, has very effectively acquired the objectifying male gaze. I am going to examine this in the following chapters.

As a sign of postfeminist obsession with body and appearances, Ana’s weight and eating is a frequent issue in the trilogy. She loses weight during the five days she and Christian are separated, and it is the first thing Christian notices: “You look like you’ve lost at least five pounds, possibly more since then [the last time they saw]” (*Darker* 13). And, when Kate and Ana meet after Kate’s holiday, her first notion is also Ana’s weight loss: “You’ve lost weight. A lot of weight” (*Darker* 450). Ana herself enjoys being more slender, although Christian does not like it and constantly urges her to eat. Here is another fantasy of a contemporary Western woman: losing weight effortlessly and having a significant other who worries about your eating!

What is more, when Ana finds out that she is pregnant, she imagines “Christian turning away from me in disgust. I’m fat and awkward, heavy with child” (*Freed* 413). In her fears, Christian would be disgusted by her “fat” body. Associating pregnancy with being fat is a common idea in tabloid magazines such as *Daily Mail* and *Us Weekly* which monitor celebrities’ post-baby bodies and make them into headlines such as “Kim’s New Body! Find Out How She Did It!” (Stewart n.p.), “‘It’s amazing, she looks incredible!’: Orlando Bloom raves about his wife Miranda Kerr’s post-baby body” (Daily Mail

Reporter n.p.) and “Kristin Cavallari debuts her slimline post-baby body just three weeks after giving birth” (Daily Mail Reporter n.p.). In this ideology pregnancy is not beautiful because it makes woman fat and, unless she sheds the excess weight in a few weeks after giving birth, the mother is considered as failed.

Since the trilogy is written from Ana’s point of view using the first person narrative, her insecurities about her looks are recorded effectively. In the beginning, Ana is certain that she is unattractive, although her friend Kate keeps telling her otherwise. However, as the story proceeds, Ana becomes more aware of her own beauty and sexuality, though never fully admitting to it. This is demonstrated when, on their honeymoon, Ana purchases a camera for Christian to take photos of her, and instantly questions why anyone would want erotic pictures of herself (*Freed* 69). Often, she does not see herself as desirable at all. Even the fact that Ana ponders upon her desirability so much is telling of the internalized male gaze: she scrutinizes her body and looks, fully aware of what she *should* look like to attract men’s desire. This is no wonder, as, according to Press, “[w]omen are promised success, glamour and happiness if only they can get the improvement script right. Prince Charming, *plus* a well-paid and glamorous career, all will follow if you can only pick out the perfect designer shoes, etc.” (119; emphasis original). This is, in effect, exactly what happens to Ana: she gets the improvement script right and, therefore, the Prince is hers, as well as a well-paid and glamorous career.

Nonetheless, there are instances where Ana admires her image in the mirror: “The young woman staring back at me looks worthy of a red carpet. Her strapless, floor-length, silver satin gown is simply stunning. [...] It’s fitted, and flatters what few curves I have” (*Darker* 128); “I gape at myself in the full-length mirror, not recognizing the vixen that

stares back at me. [...] I look...hot. I'm all legs, especially in the high-heeled Manolos and my indecently short dress" (*Freed* 291). Her dress is *indecent*, and it makes her feel sexy and desirable, worthy of her own (and others') admiration. It seems that in the postfeminist zeitgeist, being sexy means being acceptable, and that even more important than being smart is being attractive. This is what Ana learns as well and so she acts accordingly. Hila Shachar, who has analyzed Stephanie Meyer's *Twilight* saga, suggests that the mirror is a symbol that "has a long history of aligning femininity with notions of beauty and objectification wherein women are taught to view themselves as objects for a desiring masculine gaze, rather than as subjects" (151). Woman's worth is in her appearances.

So, *Fifty Shades* makes use of the makeover paradigm by turning a bland, insecure girl into a well-groomed, stylish woman; a woman worthy of a megabillionaire and luxury life. The change is due not only to Ana's increased self-confidence, but it is also due to the availability of grooming services she has; a personal styling assistant and clothes shopper, a hairdresser, and a personal trainer. By chance, Christian happens to own a beauty salon chain, and Ana naturally has an unlimited access to their services. In the beginning, Ana's lack of any sense of style is a horror to Christian, who judges her cheap, baggy clothes and untamed hair (*Freed* 559). When they become a pair, Christian buys Ana a whole new wardrobe and persuades her to start exercising with the personal trainer, although she refuses at first. Hence, in the course of the trilogy, Ana learns to wear high heels and she becomes leaner and fitter, her nails manicured, feet pedicured, hair well cut and glossy, and eyebrows threaded (*Freed* 41). She shaves her pubic hair, too, because Christian wants her to (*Freed* 48). Therefore, Ana effectively conforms to the beauty ideals of today's media.

In other words, during the course of the trilogy, Ana learns how to dress seductively in order to please Christian. She wears corsets and garter belts and stockings just for him, desperately wanting Christian to find her attractive. Ana worries about her desirability to the point that when there is an occasion when Christian does not induce her to have sex with him when they go to bed, she wonders if she should be worried (*Freed* 371). It is clear that she need not worry; Christian is only being considerate because they have just spent a day at hospital where Ana's stepfather lies unconscious. It seems to be Ana's constant fear that she is not attractive and desirable enough. She compares herself to her friend Kate, whose beauty makes her feel inadequate, and then revels in the idea that the glorious Christian Grey is attracted to her and not anyone else: "He wants *me* [...] [n]ot Kate in her little bikinis, not one of the fifteen, not evil Mrs. Robinson. Me. This beautiful man wants me" (*Grey* 191; emphasis original).

In this way, the *Fifty Shades* addresses the worry most women feel: am I attractive enough to my significant other? In the consumption culture, women are made to feel inadequate about their looks in order to sell more products, an insecurity that Ana effectively expresses. A part of the fantasy in the *Fifty Shades* is Christian's unwavering admiration of Ana:

I want you to be comfortable with your body, Anastasia. You have a beautiful body, and I like to look at it. It is a joy to behold. In fact, I could gaze at you all day, and I want you unembarrassed of your nakedness. (*Grey* 319)

This must be what most women would love to hear from their significant others. However, even Christian's unwavering admiration of Ana has a prerequisite: Ana needs to become the glamorous, fit beauty from the pages of glossy magazines in order to be a suitable girlfriend and wife to him. What she is at first is not good enough, so Christian harnesses his wealth and personnel to Ana's makeover.

When it comes to consumption and lifestyle, *Fifty Shades* truly engages with the postfeminist consumer culture. Since Ana comes from a middle-class family, she is shown constantly in awe of Christian's immense wealth – like the average reader of the trilogy would be. Through Ana's eyes, the reader can marvel at the riches and the carefree consumption it enables. For example, on their honeymoon Christian and Ana travel the Europe on a luxury yacht (“queen of all the yachts” [*Freed* 5]), and Ana's wardrobe for the trip has been procured by Caroline Acton, “the personal shopper from Neiman Marcus” (*sic*) (*Freed* 32). Neiman Marcus is a luxury specialty department store, where one can find designers such as Alexander McQueen, Christian Louboutin and Prada, and the price tags are accordingly, as Ana describes: “my hideously expensive bikini” (*Freed* 7). Even bathing is luxurious: “[t]he bath is a white stone, deep, egg-shaped affair, *very designer*. [...] [Christian] pours some *expensive-looking* bath oil into the water” (*Grey* 133; emphasis mine).

Moreover, brand awareness is another part of consumer culture that E. L. James utilizes, using luxury brands that are internationally known. For example, when characters drink wine, it is not just white wine or champagne, it is Pinot Grigio and Bollinger Grande Année Rosé 1999, “an excellent vintage”, and when they drive a car, its make is always known. Christian and Ana use Blackberries and Macs, their sofas are Chesterfield, and

even Ana's "subconscious" wears Burberry. Calling everyday items with their brand names gives the impression of wealth and fashion. It could even be called "lifestyle porn", as it is aptly called in a documentary on the *Fifty Shades (Sex Story)*.

Although in the beginning Ana seems to be very shy and introverted, interested only in classic English literature, she does show both her physical and mental strength as the trilogy advances. Eva Illouz sees Ana as "the model of assertiveness envisioned by feminism", referring to her way of defending herself and of holding her own (location 768). Yet, Ana can also be seen more as a *postfeminist* heroine: for her, glass ceiling does not exist, and she can take gender equality for granted. For Ana, as a white, middle-class, attractive and smart young woman, gender inequality is not an issue as such. She never expresses any concerns that she might be unable to find a job in publishing because she is a woman, or never ponders whether her salary is equal to men's salary in the same position.

Furthermore, thanks to her stepfather, Ana knows self-defense and how to shoot guns, and she does not hesitate to use her skills. For example, when her boss tries to make advances, Ana tackles him down (*Darker* 370). She can drive powerful sports cars fast and fearlessly, and she enjoys jet-skiing. Ana certainly has the "girl power" in her, no matter how clumsy and blushy she is initially made to seem. Her assertiveness is also seen when she refuses to change her surname at work after they are married, in order to not to make her colleagues feel like she has benefited from having married the owner of the company. She tells Christian not to interfere with her work and, instead of settling to be a trophy wife, she insists on having her own career:

But you're like a freight train, and I don't want to get railroaded because the girl you fell in love with will be crushed. And what'll be left? All that would be left is a vacuous social X-ray, flitting from charity function to charity function. [...] You've got to let me make my own decisions, take my own risks, and make my own mistakes, and let me learn from them. [...] I want some independence. That's what my name means to me. (*Freed* 166)

The postfeminist ideology is also shown in Ana's willingness to explore her sexuality. Although she is scared and intimidated at first, she yet has the desire to learn and feel new sensations. For Ana, dressing provocatively and seducing her man with erotic dance moves is empowerment, as well as having her naked photos taken, although in Christian's opinion it is objectifying women. Ana opposes Christian's view and tells him not to overthink it, saying "it was supposed to be fun, but apparently it is a symbol of women's oppression" (*Freed* 70). It is truly postfeminist when a man sees something as objectifying women but a woman thinks it is just for fun and sees nothing objectifying in it at all, because being sexy is empowerment, not submission.

However, even Ana, despite being so smart, well-educated, young and beautiful, initially worries about staying alone, becoming a spinster with lots of cats. In fact, this worry is the ultimate impetus that causes Ana to submit herself to Christian's spankings: "*Should I run?* This is it; our relationship hangs in the balance, right here, right now. Do I let him do this or do I say no, and then that's it? Because I know it will be over if I say no" (*Grey* 273; emphasis original), and her "inner goddess" pleads: "Please, let's do this... otherwise we'll end up alone with lots of cats and your classic novels to keep you company" (*Grey* 176). This links Ana to the postfeminist fears that men do not want

women who reassert themselves. Basically, the lesson of the trilogy is that a woman should submit to anything in order to secure herself a man before it is too late.

In sum, postfeminist views on sexuality, gender, body and consumption are clearly present in the *Fifty Shades* trilogy. The protagonist, Ana, is a young woman who enjoys her new-found sexuality and femininity, indulging in fashion and money. She explores her sexuality freely and is not afraid to dress provocatively. High heels, long hair, make up and designer clothes become Ana's life when she enters in a relationship with Christian. Her complete makeover is in postfeminist style: previously bland and unstylish girl who has never known what desire is becomes a gorgeous and passionate "vixen". Postfeminist obsession with body and self-monitoring is shown by Ana being very conscious of her weight and feeling more attractive when she loses a few pounds. Moreover, gender difference is accentuated in the trilogy, and heterosexuality is taken for granted. Conservative conceptions of marriage and sexuality are also evident in the *Fifty Shades* as promiscuity is condemned and marriage described as sexy and desirable.

4. Conclusion

The *Fifty Shades* trilogy of books, written by E. L. James, has sold millions worldwide. It became the publishing phenomenon of 2012, earning its writer a lot of money, and resulting in a reborn interest in erotic fiction. The trilogy received a lot of criticism, especially for its poor language and its fallacious depiction of bdsm. However, the fans of the books praise them for a hooking reading experience and for changing their own sex lives. There are many reviews on *Amazon.com* where the fans confess that they do not read books in general, but once they began to read the *Fifty Shades*, they could not put it down. “Hot, feisty, dark yet funny, and crazy emotional, *Fifty Shades of Grey* is fifty shades of fantastic”, wrote one fan in an Amazon review (The Raunch Dilettante "Amanda Ryan"). According to Stephen Snyder, *Fifty Shades* has “special erotic power” because Christian Grey is a combination of scariness, goodness and sincerity; a combination that makes women “want more” (n.p.)

In this thesis, however, I have shown that the eroticism in this popular trilogy is, in fact, conservative and patriarchal. I have located the trilogy to the popular genre of romance fiction and described how the conventions of romance are found in the *Fifty Shades*. These conventions include an inexperienced heroine and a super masculine hero who fall in love despite their differences. Underneath the hard exterior that the heroine first sees in the hero is a good man, whom the heroine can love and thus change the “bad boy”. This is the storyline of the *Fifty Shades* as well, since Ana sees Christian’s vulnerabilities and decides to heal him, succeeding perfectly. Moreover, according to the conventions of romance, sexuality in the trilogy is heterosexual and monogamous, and marriage is the desirable outcome.

Romance can be seen as a backlash text, and so in this thesis I have presented a critical postfeminist reading of the *Fifty Shades*. I argue that the trilogy, while appearing to do otherwise, in fact conveys and reinforces patriarchal and conservative ideologies. It conforms to the postfeminist ideas on body, consumption and sexuality: sexualized culture values bodies that are deemed attractive and thus sexual, and bodies can be made more attractive by consuming products that promise to do so. Bodies in the *Fifty Shades* are scrutinized and objectified, and appearances are improved through exercise, beauty treatments, make up and fashionable clothes. The postfeminist makeover paradigm is at play in the trilogy as Ana is transformed to comply with Western beauty ideals.

Furthermore, gender difference is naturalized and eroticized in the *Fifty Shades*. The man has the money and power, and he attempts to control everything. The woman has her looks and sexual appeal, which make her a suitable partner for the man. The eroticism in the trilogy is not so much in the actual sex scenes than it is in the eroticizing of money and social status that Ana gains when she marries Christian. In this way, patriarchal gender roles go unchallenged: there is the division of master/slave and husband/wife. However, Ana's decision to pursue her own career instead of becoming a "trophy wife" can be seen as postfeminist ideal. She has the possibility to stay at home and concentrate on shopping, but she values independence more.

As abortion is deemed "dark" and promiscuity is reprehensible, the *Fifty Shades* is less liberating than it is conservative. Although the bdsm scenes in the trilogy caused sensation when it was published, bdsm is actually condemned in the *Fifty Shades*, not described as a sexual practice of two consenting adults who enjoy it. The message of the trilogy is that

“vanilla” sex (that is, making love without any “kinky stuff”) between a man and a woman who are in a monogamous relationship is the best and most acceptable form of sexuality.

So, in this study I have discussed how the views on sexuality and eroticism are patriarchal and conservative in the *Fifty Shades* trilogy, albeit its success resulted from its explicit eroticism. However, I have touched the issue of pornification of culture only a little, and that could provide further interest for study: the *Fifty Shades* can be seen as an example of widely recognized pornification. Today more than ever, young girls are taught by the media that their only worth lies in sexiness. Being sexy (that is, being skinny and having silicone implant on lips, breast and buttocks) opens the door to publicity and fame, which leads to wealth and social status, and having the admiration of all. Although Ana does not have silicone implants, she is considered “hot”, and that is what gains her a billionaire husband, not her college degree.

At the end, there are two questions that I find myself thinking. Firstly, what if the story was written the other way around, so that the woman was the powerful domina and the man the one who submits? Perhaps that arrangement would have made the trilogy a true sensation: turning familiar gender roles on their head by making a woman punish a man. It could have been read as women asserting themselves and taking their frustration on gender inequality on men. That would have been a fresh point of view.

Secondly, what if the *Fifty Shades* was written by a man? If E. L. James was a man who tells the public that he has only written down his fantasies, would the story then be viewed differently, not as empowering to women but as chauvinistic and patriarchal? I am certain it would. Hidden behind the mask of postfeminist female sexual revolution, the *Fifty*

Shades can be sold as empowering to women, while in reality it is not. When a man fantasizes about subordinating a woman, both physically and mentally, it is judged harshly. However, when a woman does so, it is justified by female empowerment on one hand and by women's desire to return back to the hearth on the other. It is a sign of the view that what women really want is a man who controls them and tells them what to do, because empowerment is too much for women to handle.

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