

Paola da Cunha Nichele

**CHAINS AND WHIPS EXCITE ME:
A DISCUSSION OF BDSM PRACTICES IN *BEAUTY'S
KINGDOM***

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Milléo Martins

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Paola da Cunha Nichele

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PRACTICES IN BEAUTY'S KINGDOM**

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Prof. Celso Tumolo, Dr.
Coordenador do Curso

Banca Examinadora:

Prof.^a Maria Lúcia Milléo Martins, Dr.^a
Orientadora
Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina

Prof.^a Maria Teresa Collares, Dr.^a
Instituto Federal de Santa Catarina

Prof.^a Ramayana Lira, Dr.^a.
Universidade do Sul de Santa Catarina

Prof.^a Alinne Balduino Pires Fernandes, Dr.^a
Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina

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Everything in the world is about sex, except sex.
Sex is about power.
(Oscar Wilde, 1981)

RESUMO

Este trabalho analisa *O Reino da Bela* (2015), escrito por Anne Rice – romance que apresenta relações de BDSM (Bondage/Disciplina, Dominação/Submissão, Sadismo/Masochismo) através da submissão sexual voluntária. O romance é uma releitura da obra *A Bela Adormecida*; o volume analisado foi publicado em 2015, quatro anos após a publicação de *Cinquenta Tons de Cinza* (2011), que trouxe consigo a popularização da literatura erótica voltada ao público feminino. O objetivo principal do trabalho é analisar a representação de BDSM nesse romance. Esse objetivo será atingido através de objetivos específicos, que são: discutir as representações de BDSM que corroboram com o debate existente sobre BDSM e feminismo, com base nas discussões de teóricas como Pat Califia, Ann Ferguson, Patrick Hopkins, e outros. Também procuro possíveis representações de BDSM que vão além dos debates existentes sobre o assunto e, assim, apresentam a possibilidade de repensar tais práticas; para a definição de práticas que se propõem a repensar relações de BDSM trabalho com a proposta de Margot Weiss, apresentada na obra *BDSM and the Circuits of Sexuality* (2011). A análise mostra que o romance faz uma tentativa de oferecer uma narrativa subversiva, mas, no entanto, acaba reproduzindo estereótipos de gênero e, muitas vezes, relacionados a valores patriarcais.

Palavras-chave: Literatura Erótica. BDSM. Sexualidade. Feminismo. O Reino de Bela.

ABSTRACT

This study analyses *Beauty's Kingdom* (2015), written by Anne Rice – a novel that presents BDSM (Bondage/Discipline, Dominance/Submission, Sadism/Masochism) relations through voluntary sexual submission. The volume chosen was published in 2015, four years after the publication of *Fifty Shades of Grey* (2011), that brought the popularization of erotic literature for a female readership. The main objective is to analyze BDSM representations in the novel *Beauty's Kingdom*. The main objective is achieved through specific ones, which are i. to discuss the BDSM representations that follow the existent debate about BDSM and feminism, based on the discussions of theoreticians such as Pat Califia, Ann Ferguson, Patrick Hopkins, among others; and ii. to look for BDSM representations that go beyond the existent debate and present possibilities to rethink such practices, as proposed by Margot Weiss, in the work entitled *BDSM and the Circuits of Sexuality* (2011). The analysis showed that the novel makes an attempt to present a subversive narrative; however, it ends up reproducing gender stereotypes, that are many times related to patriarchal values.

Keywords: Erotic Literature. *Beauty's Kingdom*. Feminism. BDSM.

Sumário

| | | |
|--------------|---|-----------|
| 1 | INTRODUCTION..... | 17 |
| 1.1 | Erotic Literature | 17 |
| 1.2 | BDSM..... | 20 |
| 1.3 | Postfeminism..... | 23 |
| 1.4 | Beauty’s Kingdom..... | 25 |
| 2 | BDSM AND FEMINISM..... | 27 |
| 2.1 | BDSM and the uses of the erotic..... | 32 |
| 3 | BELLAVALTEN’S TREASURE | 37 |
| 3.1 | The Kingdom of Bellavalten..... | 38 |
| 3.1.1 | Consent..... | 42 |
| 3.2 | Hierarchies..... | 44 |
| 4 | LONG LIVE THE QUEEN..... | 49 |
| 4.1 | Be the change..... | 50 |
| 4.2 | Political effects..... | 57 |
| 4.2.1 | Slavery..... | 59 |
| 5 | FINAL REMARKS..... | 61 |
| 6 | REFERENCES..... | 63 |

PREFACE

When entering the BDSM community, I found myself in a conflicting situation: I recognized myself as Submissive and Masochist, but I also considered myself a feminist. How could I be feminist and submissive to a man¹? After uttering such conflict and doing some research on the subject, I realized that I could be feminist and submissive – and it is by focusing on this discussion that I developed my work. At first I thought this research would make things clearer to me, and I would be more comfortable accepting my submissive and feminist sides. However, all the critical reading and analysis I made throughout this research got me more confused, messing with my mind. Instead of re-assuring my previous notions, it made me doubt everything. I believe that a good research won't give me all the answers, but will make me question them – I expect my readers (is there any?) to enjoy this questioning.

¹ In my case I was submissive to a man, but not all submissive women necessarily have men as masters.

1 INTRODUCTION

The publication of the novel *Fifty Shades of Grey* (2011) and its huge success² opened up a debate about sexuality and feminism, sharing readers' diverse responses between adoration and negative criticism (Campello 231). Eliane Campello searched on internet forums for comments regarding the novel, and among those who criticize it, one specific commentary caught my attention: "Superficial book that remind us of something that we, as women, try to fight by centuries: the submission!" (233)³. The submission represented in the novel is related to **BDSM** (Bondage/Discipline, Dominance/Submission, and Sadism/Masochism); some argue that such relations are degrading to women, while others see it as a means for sexual liberation. In this chapter, I will present a brief discussion on erotic literature – focusing on erotic literature by women – as well as an introduction to BDSM and its classifications and vocabulary. I will also discuss the term "postfeminism" in relation to BDSM, and finally discuss the novel in the context of these issues.

1.1 Erotic Literature

Erotic literature has been published for a long time, and its significance has changed throughout different moments in society. According to Sarane Alexandrian, for the ancient Greeks and Romans, erotic stories were considered harmless, a mere entertainment. But then, in western society, stoic philosophers started a call for "decency," and anything related to sex was considered impure – and forbidden (Alexandrian 31). However, erotic literature did not cease to exist; it just survived on the margins. And while on the margins of what was considered "high" literature erotic works had the function to be subversive and criticize those in power. They could be used to discuss philosophy or tell a simple love story, as different authors appropriated eroticism with distinctive purposes in mind. Sade's works, for example, related to philosophy, sadism, and other themes that interested him, but other writers of the erotic genre preferred to write about a woman who

²According to Eliane Campello, by 2013, more than 70 million copies were sold (230).

³"Livro superficial, que nos lembra algo que há séculos nós mulheres tentamos combater: a submissão!" My translation.

falls in love with a man and explores sexual experiences in her life – like the novels by Nora Roberts, or books such as *Sabrina*, published during the 80s.

Within these different perspectives and different choices regarding the use of the erotic genre, another issue may be brought to light: erotic literature written by women. While the genre remained on the margins, erotic literature by women suffered from an extensive repression, not because it was considered impure or subversive, but due to the repression of women's sexuality itself. It was not acceptable for women to write about the erotic because they were supposed to be "romantic," as stated by Alexandrian, in *The History of Erotic Literature* (1993), in which he says that women should only write within the sentimental genre, in which they are insuperable (328).

Regardless of Alexandrian's belief about the low acceptability of women writing erotic novels, the number of women using this genre increased, and women started writing erotic novels for a female audience. Nowadays erotic novels written by women have become popular; those novels have in common a woman as main character who is exploring her sexuality through sexual adventures, and enjoying sexual intercourse through BDSM. Amber Jamila Musser mentions the novel *Fifty Shades of Grey* as responsible for popularizing erotic novels among women, and Musser also mentions that this was not the first novel to address issues as BDSM within erotic literature written by women, since *Story of O*, published in 1954, already dealt with such theme (122).

Shirin Eshghi, in her thesis entitled *Female authorship and implicit power in women's erotica: Japanese 'Ladies Comics' and Fifty Shades of Grey*, writes about the importance, for women readers, to read erotic novels written by other women, because there is identification between writer and reader, as if they are friends telling each others sexual adventures (20). Eshghi works with the hypothesis that women writing within the erotic genre, regardless of the content, is a transgressive act; and Luciana Borges also argues, in the book *O erotismo como ruptura: um estudo de Clarice Lispector, Hilda Hilst e Fernanda Young*, that erotic literature written by women can be seen as a transgressive gesture, since it enables women to be agents of their own sexuality – and it is also relevant because they are coming out of the domestic atmosphere (111), the stereotypical place in which women are sometimes confined.

Different from what Alexandrian thought women's writings should be about – the sentimental genre – Lori Saint-Martin, in her contribution to the *Encyclopedia of Erotic Literature*, calls attention to the themes present in erotic literature by women: “[it] is not limited to gentle ‘vanilla’ sex: violence, S/M, and aggressive impulses are all frequent themes” (459). Such works provided a space for women to explore their sexuality, along with sexual fantasies and desires (Saint-Martin 459). According to Saint-Martin, nowadays there are more women than men writing erotic literature, and themes go from rape, incest and violence, to stereotypes about women's sensitiveness, and even themes that challenge the status quo; Saint-Martin ends her argument stating that “women's exploration of sexuality would be seen to be here to stay” (459). However, even those in a position of subordinate to a dominant group, such as women in relation to men, may reproduce values from the dominant culture; as Jean Baker Miller explains, the continuous repetition that women are passive, weak, or submissive, makes subordinate groups absorb and reproduce such values (49) – as reproducing thematic as rape and violence, and consider it to be a way in which women are exploring their sexuality. An example of the internalization and reproduction of such values by women, within erotic literature, is how the novel *Fifty Shades of Grey*, written by a woman, leaves aside discussions about gender and agency (Musser 122), and it ends up blurring the boundary between BDSM and abuse, since the motivation for Christian Grey to be a dominant is a pathology, related to an abusive childhood, there is a variety of scenes demonstrating that Anastasia, the main character, does not fully understand BDSM dynamics, nor understands to what exactly she is consenting to (Musser 131). Therefore, the novel presents an abusive relationship that is romanticized, since Anastasia is constantly trying to please Christian, even though she does not feel comfortable with the practices she is consenting to (Musser 131).

One of the first erotic novels I read, which was also an introduction to BDSM was *Story of O*, recommended by a friend, member of a BDSM community. They suggested to me the novel stating that it was one of the greatest erotic literary works on BDSM and which could help me understand such world – since I was starting to get familiar with BDSM and still figuring out how I identified myself within this context. Is presented as an object whose function was to obey and provide pleasures for every men in the narrative. The novel *Story of O* was considered to be controversial, since although it won a French

literary prize in 1955, the *Prix des Deux Magots*, which is dedicated to marginal literary works, it also received charges from French authorities for being too obscene, having a publicity ban imposed for years. The novel was written by Anne Desclos – under the pen name Pauline Réage – because Desclos’ lover, Jean Paulhan, admired Sade’s work, and said that a woman could never write something similar to Sade’s stories. Desclos accepted the challenge and wrote *Story of O* for Paulhan, and proved that a woman could write about sex and sadomasochism, and be as “obscene” as Sade was. Desclos also proved Alexandrian wrong, when he stated that women should limit themselves to the sentimental genre.

Working with erotic literature enables a connection between literature and sexuality, which has been my interest since under graduation. In this research, my focus is on BDSM practices and its relation to feminist discussions.

1.2BDSM

The scholar Lewis Call, author of *BDSM in America Science Fiction and Fantasy* (2013), besides presenting a discussion about BDSM within literature, also has a brief introduction to BDSM practices. The term BDSM, as Call says, belongs to the present generation, since the previous generations would have the acronyms DS (dominance/ submission) and SM (sadism/ masochism) separating the practices. BDSM, on the other hand, “reflects a desire to embrace the greatest possible ‘plurality of practices’” (2). Call also explains that BDSM practitioners tend to be part of communities where they can express and explore their desires separated from the “vanilla⁴” world (2). Within BDSM practices there is a variety of nominations to categorize the role of the participants, as Call explains:

A man who takes on a dominant role can be called a Dom; a dominant woman is often referred to as Domme. A submissive of either gender can be designated as sub. The most dramatic form of the Dom(me)/sub dynamic is erotic play-slavery, a type of power exchange which mimics the form of chattel slavery (...). The dominant partner in a play-slavery relationship is the Master (male) or Mistress (female); the submissive partner is called a slave. The terms “top” and “bottom” usually refer to

⁴People who are not engaged in BDSM practices.

the more physical kinds of play. A top is someone who gives physical sensation (e.g. pain); while a bottom receives such sensation. (Call 7)

Call also emphasizes the fact that being a bottom is not necessarily related to being submissive (7). Such variety of nominations and roles also allow the practitioners to switch roles, and because of that, another category was created: the “switchers.” Switchers “found the polarities less attractive than variation between roles” (Call 8).

There is an extensive discussion, mostly by feminist scholars, on the role of BDSM relations; if those relations adhere to patriarchal values, if they undermine women, or if it is considered as a means of sexual liberation. Debates about sexuality, inserted within a feminist context, usually have two main sides: Radical and Libertarian feminists. For the discussion regarding BDSM relations, Radical feminists are against BDSM – it is considered to reproduce male dominance. On the other hand, Libertarian feminists claim that every sexual practice is an act of sexual freedom and empowerment, as long as it is consensual. According to Patrick Hopkins, in the late 1970s, when some women declared that they were feminists and sadomasochists, it was pretty shocking for feminist activists of the time (116). Some of the most well-known feminist scholars who were discussing sexuality in the 80’s and 90’s were Diana Russel, Judith Butler, Pat Califia and Gayle Rubin.

To better explain the specific sex war this research draws on, I will rely on Ann Ferguson’s article entitled “Sex War: The Debate between Radical and Libertarian Feminists” (1984). Here Ferguson explains that by the 1980s, when discussions about sexuality became an issue in Academia, feminists would identify themselves in two groups: Radical and Libertarian. Radical feminists would criticize sadomasochism, pornography, prostitution, among other practices, arguing that they perpetuate male dominance; on the other hand, the libertarian feminists would support any kind of consensual sexual practice that brings pleasure to the ones involved (107).

Among distinct perspectives regarding BDSM practices within feminism there are authors who believe that a binary discussion, considering pros or cons, would not be enough to fully discuss the implication of BDSM practices. Ferguson, in the aforementioned article, demonstrates concern with such debate, arguing that women should have the possibility to choose whether they want to engage in such practices, without feeling guilty (112). Another author who advocates in

favor of a broader discussion regarding BDSM is Lynn S. Chancer who argues that is fundamental to rethink BDSM practices, since she fears that if the feminist movement repressed women who are BDSM practitioners, it would risk “reproducing another version of sexual repression” (83). Chancer suggests that the focus should not be on individual choices, but in the whole context in which such practice is inserted and what it represents. She compares it to discussions related to pornography: the discussions about pornography should not be centered on whether a woman enjoys watching it or not, but on the porn industry itself. Therefore, discussions about BDSM should not focus on whether women enjoy it or not, but on the implications of such practices, and what they represent for its participants. Building from Chancer’s arguments about the need to rethink BDSM practices, one of the objectives of this research is to rethink BDSM practices considering how practices may vary depending on its participants, and which elements participants can bring to practices that will significantly alter their meaning.

Margot Weiss, author of *BDSM and the Circuits of Sexuality* (2011), also adds to the discussion about rethinking BDSM practices, proposing to analyze BDSM scenes considering elements such as “social location, audience reception, and discursive and ideological production” (188), because for the BDSM scene to be effective and political, it connects the real (social) with the scene (performance), without drawing a line between what is fantasy and what is real. Weiss argues that some BDSM practitioners “justify social inequality (based on race, class, and gender) through purportedly neutral subjectivity” (189) which make those practitioners who are part of the dominant group – such as man, white, and middle-class – exempt from oppressive social norms, therefore, reinforcing their own privileges. As an example of such privilege, the author Robin Bauer discusses the uses of terms such as “master” and “slave,” pointing out that among BDSM practitioners, mainly white people, there is no politicization of such terms, issues such as gender and class are constantly addressed in BDSM scenes, while race is put aside and depoliticized, which Bauer claims to be “a white privilege not to concern oneself with one’s racial status and history when playing as slave” (246).

Although the high point of the debate about BDSM and feminism happened during the 1970s and half of the 1980s, it is an issue that, according to Patrick D. Hopkins, has never been settled (117), especially when considering how BDSM practices became a trend among women,

a factor that reintroduced the discussions and debates about BDSM within feminism.

1.3 Postfeminism

Nowadays, erotic novels and BDSM have become popular for a female readership, and it reflects what is called “postfeminism.” Postfeminism is understood differently by distinct theoreticians. In Mary Hawkesworth’s essay entitled “The semiotics of premature burial: Feminism in a postfeminist age,” she explains that postfeminism is seen as the death of feminism. Representing a backlash against feminism, the movement considers that feminist goals have been achieved, and therefore, there is no need for the feminist movement to continue. Laura Harvey, Rosalind Gill and Feona Atwood also address the issue of postfeminism, but focusing on the trivialization of feminist goals, such as women being sexy and confident, but in the service of men.

The sex wars may have started in the 1970s, but the discussion has not ended. There are still different opinions regarding sexuality from distinct feminist groups – such as Radical and Libertarian. But nowadays the media has, through advertisements, pop songs, celebrities and so on, been reproducing notions related to postfeminism. The main approach to postfeminism, according to Margaret Atwood, is that women *have* to be sexually active and into pole dance, sexy lingerie, BDSM practices; Atwood argues that “the explicit has become familiar and sexual transgression so mainstream” (80).

Harvey and Gill, in their chapter entitled “Spicing it Up: Sexual Entrepreneurs and *The Sex Inspectors*” discuss postfeminism in an attempt to problematize it and debate what this movement intends to do for women. Harvey and Gill wonder if it

[r]elates to whether the proliferation of representations of women as desirable and sexually agentic represents a real and positive change in depictions of female sexuality, or whether, by contrast, it is merely a postfeminist repackaging of feminist ideas in a way that renders them depoliticized and presses them into the service of patriarchal consumer capitalism. (54)

Harvey and Gill consider postfeminism to be mainly about consumerism – while it appears to be a movement concerned with

women's sexual freedom, it is actually selling body wax, pole dance classes, and sex toys.

I remember presenting a paper in a conference in Oxford, in 2016, about a novel written by an ex-porn star, in which the main character goes through sexual adventures, including orgies, BDSM practices, and bisexual relations. At that time, I saw the proliferation of sexual experiences, as those abovementioned – orgies, BDSM, and so on – as empowering for women, since it could not do any harm – after all, I agree with women's sexual freedom. At the end of my presentation, one of the colleagues who were participating in the conference asked me “what about women who do not want to have sex?” And she was not referring to intense sexual adventures and experiences, but sex in general. My focus on that specific research was on the taboo imposed on women's sexuality, in which women are perceived as passive, as mere participants in sexual relations, and not as agents of their own sexuality – and due to this notion, I argued that the novel I was analyzing represented a positive image to women. I stand by my argument, but now I also understand the relation to this notion sold by postfeminism in which there is a certain pressure regarding women's sexual freedom – usually to please male partners.

In a way, a new perspective towards women's sexuality, such as postfeminism and its apparent concern with sexual freedom, may seem to place them as agents and not only participants, but there is no actual interest in sexual liberation or breaking taboos, it is only a different way to put women in a place where they continue to be objectified – and this objectification is “simply wrapped up in a feisty, empowered sounding discourse” (Harvey and Gill 55)

Some of the ideas sold by this notion of postfeminism are that women must always be “up for it,” be sexy, have knowledge about non-traditional forms of sex, and this can be seen even in heroines – in TV shows, novels, movies. They no longer have to be virgins or pure, but be skilled in a variety of sexual practices, showing confidence about their sexuality (Harvey and Gill 56). There is no problem in telling women to be sexy and confident, but such notions of postfeminism end up as a service for male needs. According to this notion, women have to be confident and sexy but also sensitive with men's fears, and always within the limits of a heterosexual and monogamist relationship (Harvey and Gill 64).

The popularization of postfeminism and BDSM practices have similarities. Maneesha Deckha, in her essay “Pain as Culture: A

Postcolonial Feminist Approach to S/M and Women’s Agency”, calls attention to the fact that what is indeed popularized is not BDSM as a practice or even its practitioners; what is popular – and sold – are BDSM props, like leather clothes, fluffy handcuffs, Hollywood movies and stars in stylized costumes that remind us of BDSM. Deckha’s observation about BDSM and its popularization through consumerism relates to the spread of postfeminism – both are superficially concerned with sexuality, but in the end, it is used as advertisement to sell sex. So what sells is not feminism with its history, fights, and conquests; but feminism that relies on pole dance and sexy outfits. The kind of BDSM which became popular is not rough BDSM, but the romantic master who falls in love with his submissive partner, and lives happily ever after.

1.4 Beauty’s Kingdom

In my search for contemporary erotic novels that portrayed BDSM relations I found the novel *Beauty’s Kingdom*, by Anne Rice. The novel is the fourth volume of what should be the Sleeping Beauty Trilogy. Throughout the three volumes, entitled *The Claiming of Sleeping Beauty* (1983), *Beauty’s Punishment* (1984), and *Beauty’s Release* (1985), Rice, writing under the pen name A. N. Roquelaure, introduces a new version of the fairy tale *Sleeping Beauty*, in a medieval kingdom where people are trained to be sexual slaves or masters – the slaves being usually forced to be in the castle, having no right to complain or disobey.

What is now called the Sleeping Beauty Quartet should have ended in the third volume of the series; Anne Rice published the fourth volume thirty years after the last volume of her initial trilogy, in a context where, as previously mentioned, erotic novels are being popularized. The fourth volume of the Sleeping Beauty Quartet, by Anne Rice, called my attention in relation to a change in the narrative from the three initial books: in the fourth book, entitled *Beauty’s Kingdom*, the main character, Beauty, would run the Kingdom and decree that every sexual slave in the castle should be voluntary, and have the free will to choose whether they wanted to remain in the kingdom. The Sleeping Beauty Quartet was initially published in the 1980s, when BDSM representations in fiction started to portray gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered BDSM practitioners, and the trilogy

presents characters that are bisexual and switchers⁵. There are not any academic studies about *Beauty's Kingdom* yet since it was recently published (2015). In order to contextualize the Sleeping Beauty Quartet, I will address studies made on the three initial books that composed the Sleeping Beauty Quartet. Amber Jamilla Musser, author of the article "BDSM and the boundaries of criticism: Feminism and neoliberalism in *Fifty Shades of Grey* and *Story of O*" says that *Story of O* is located in an unrealistic setting, a fictional place that cannot be referenced as a place in reality. For *Story of O*, it is Roissy, and for the Sleeping Beauty Trilogy is the kingdom the characters live in. As Musser clarifies, this kind of novel is not *about* BDSM, but it "locates the culture of BDSM in spaces that are removed from the everyday spaces that the (...) readers inhabit" (124). Due to this fact, the reader is invited to "focus more on the relationship between the characters and to dwell on what BDSM represents in the relationships portrayed" (124). The novel does not necessarily address the rules and ethics of BDSM explicitly, but the BDSM representations in Sleeping Beauty Quartet are perceived through the sexual relations among the characters, such as spanking, bondage, humiliation, psychological and physical domination in general; such interactions are read as BDSM scenes, making possible the analysis of the novel as BDSM representations.

The beginning of the Sleeping Beauty Trilogy already sets the mood of the whole quartet: the Sleeping Beauty is not awakened by Prince charming with a romantic kiss; but raped by a Prince who takes her to his kingdom and turns her into a sex slave. Beauty is not the only slave in the kingdom; as it turns out, her parents had been slaves in the same place, and since the Prince woke her up and saved her kingdom – they were all asleep until Beauty was awakened – it was now her duty to serve Queen's Eleanor – the new ruler of the kingdom her parents had served. Not everyone could be a sex slave in the kingdom of Bellavalten, only the "young royalty." The BDSM scenario and the presence of sex slaves are not a reality in the whole fictional world of the Sleeping Beauty Trilogy; there are other villages and kingdoms that do not follow the example of the kingdom of Bellavalten.

What differentiates *Beauty's Kingdom* from its previous volumes is that in this specific narrative the submission is voluntary. The character Beauty, who was a sexual slave in the initial trilogy and then got her freedom by marrying with her lover and leaving the kingdom,

⁵BDSM practitioners who can be either dominant or submissive.

now replaces the ancient Queen, becoming the new ruler of the kingdom, and decrees that sexual slavery would only be voluntary. The fourth volume of the quartet is more appealing to me because of a change in the narrative, which is the possibility of choice and consent – an important issue when debating BDSM.

2 BDSM AND FEMINISM

Novels such as *Beauty's Kingdom*, with a BDSM themes and aimed at a female readership, bring back the discussions about BDSM and feminism – what influence does it have in its women readers? As mentioned before, the debate about BDSM and feminism first appeared in the Academia, mostly within Women and Gender Studies, back in the 80's, and it is an issue that has not been settled.

Diana Russel observes that there is a social construction that tells women they are submissive to men in the daily life, and consenting with BDSM practices that reinforce the notion of women as submissive could be just an internalization of this patriarchal belief (177). The scholar Jean Baker Miller writes a chapter in the book entitled *The Gender Gap in Psychotherapy*, discussing how a dominant group – men, white people – behaves and influences the “subalterns” – women, people of color – behavior. Miller explains that a “dominant group inevitably has the greatest influence in determining a culture's overall outlook” (47), which is related to the notion that, for example, “women are inherently passive, submissive, and docile” (47). Miller mentions that the continuous repetition of such notions makes subordinates absorb and internalize what the dominant group reproduces (49). Moreover, the scholar Harriet Lerner emphasize that

Since men hold the power and authority, women are rewarded for developing a set of psychological characteristics that accommodate to and please men. Such traits – submissiveness, compliance, passivity, helplessness, weakness – have been encouraged in women (122).

Therefore, arguing that BDSM only happens under consent can be questioned. If a woman has internalized, thanks to dominant culture's beliefs, that she deserves to be objectified and serve male's purposes, she may consent to it without questioning – and that does not mean empowerment. Patriarchal values reinforce the notion that women may

be psychological and physically abused by men and for men's purposes (Hopkins 118), therefore, it places men in a position of power towards women, creating the possibility of coercion, pressuring woman to consent to BDSM practices that may objectify and humiliate them. As the scholar Karen Rian observes "our [women] sexuality has been for the most part constructed through social structures over which we have had no control" (49), "consenting" to being humiliated and objectified by men may be a coercive act.

The scholar Gayle Rubin was one of the first BDSM practitioners to demand a "political identity" from other practitioners, and from the BDSM practice itself (Call 5). Following Rubin's view of BDSM, Pat Califia criticized the fragmentation of BDSM communities, and both of them, Rubin and Califia, began the scholarly discussions about BDSM, since as soon as they went public with their kinky identities, the collection *Against Sadomasochism* was published, in 1982, challenging the consent, as well as the patriarchal values that seemed to be too inserted in the practice (Call 5).

The main argument of scholars who oppose themselves to BDSM practices is that such practices reinforce and reproduce patriarchal values, since "[p]atriarchal society allows or encourages sexual, economic, and psychological abuse of women, largely at the hands of men and for men's purposes" (Hopkins 118). Even in lesbian BDSM relations, in which both participants are women, if one of them chooses to inflict pain or humiliate the other, they will be reproducing patriarchal values, because the notion is that "[p]leasure is to be had at the expense of women's pain" (118). Because of this patriarchal notion that women should be undermined and used for men's purposes, many women, even women who identify as feminists, may internalize such beliefs without realizing, reinforcing then the patriarchal culture – and such internalization ends up devaluing the argument about consent.

Call explains that the principal ethical principle of BDSM practices is the "*consent* informed by *desire*" (11). However, if the woman has internalized that she deserves an abusive treatment, as being humiliated and objectified, her consent to this practice will be irrelevant. As Butler argues "That sm [or bdsm] requires consent does not mean that it has overcome heterosexual power dynamics. Women have been consenting to heterosexual power dynamics for thousands of years" (172).

An argument that some scholars have made in order to contest the notion that BDSM reinforces and reproduces patriarchal values, is

that BDSM is a mere simulation of such practices, as Hopkins points out “SM sexual activity does not replicate patriarchal sexual activity. It simulates it. (...) Simulation implies that SM selectively replays surface patriarchal behaviors onto a different contextual field” (123). Such argument can be challenged by Butler’s statement that “[w]hat is problematic is that SM takes non-reflective attitude toward sexual desire” (172). Truscott, for example, rejects the idea that sadomasochism is violent, because each scene, each whipping or beating, is safely enacted – and done so under consent (30). Truscott’s argument can be related to the notion that BDSM is a mere simulation. Patrick Hopkins presents different arguments to debate whether BDSM is harmful or not, and his main claim is that

[w]hat makes events like rape, kidnapping, slavery, and bondage evil in the first place is the fact that they cause harm, limit freedom, terrify, destroy, and coerce. But in SM there is attraction, negotiation, the power to halt the activity, the power to switch roles, and attention to safety. (Hopkins 124)

Hopkins’ focus on the opposition between reality and simulation is not enough to assure that BDSM practices are not reinforcing values from a dominant culture. The author claims that BDSM scenes are merely simulations of acts like spanking, rape, torture, slavery – they do not corroborate such acts in real situations. By repeating values from the dominant culture through abusive patterns – as rape scenes or slavery – there is a reinforcing of those practices, and relating it to pleasure may diminish the dangerous that rape and torture, for example, can cause to a person. Hopkins defends that someone who enjoys rape scenes will not necessarily be in favor of rape, for example (122). However, either BDSM practitioners intend to do it or not, they may end up naturalizing and reproducing values from the dominant culture in relation to gender, race and class.

BDSM should not be seen as a mere simulation, and holding to such argument reinforces the belief mentioned by Butler that “SM takes a non-reflective attitude toward sexual desire” (172), which would be the same as claiming that a fetish should not be problematized, or that sexuality is not political. Even Hopkins mentions that BDSM “moved beyond its initial focus on absolute, personal privacy (...) and has moved into the realms of political identity” (117), therefore it is necessary to problematize the practice, and not fall into the argument

that it is a mere simulation of values from the dominant culture.

In Margot Weiss' *The Techniques of Pleasure: BDSM and the Circuits of Sexuality*, the author explains that some practitioners read BDSM as “a fantasized split between the real (social inequality, norms, oppression, politics – the public) and the scene (radicalness, transgressions, equality, desire – the private) that can serve to ‘excuse’ some practitioners from their privilege” (188). To exemplify how some BDSM practitioners use the notion of private and public to excuse themselves from their privileges, she analyzed a scene about a “slave auction.” Weiss interviewed different practitioners present in the scene – majority of white people – and asked about the slave auctions, and if those practitioners perceived the issue of race in such scene. Weiss noticed that for white practitioners “slave auctions and SM in general are about abstract or neutral, not racialized, power” (194); on the other hand, when interviewing a black woman about the master/ slave scene, the woman expressed her discomfort with such scene, to which Weiss concludes that it “illustrates that SM play and power in the scene is based on larger, national meanings and histories of race” (196). Stating that BDSM is not reality, or that it is “neutral,” is to ignore a variety of socio-cultural elements that are present in the practice and that can be either problematized or naturalized.

Weiss discusses the issue of race, as aforementioned, but also the fact that BDSM has become a product. Weiss mentions that she notices the BDSM community as “a hobby with specialized magazines, websites and mailing lists, publishers, books, how-to films, classes, (...) organizations and networks, conferences, paraphernalia, tools and toys, clothing, technologies, tips” (67). In order to become a master/mistress, depending on the community the practitioner is part of, there is a variety of classes and courses one must take before claiming to be a master. In her research, Weiss mentions a specific BDSM community in which the practitioners “become fully certified (...) after a six-month period as trainee, during which they must log fifteen one-hour shifts at parties and take ten qualifying skill classes” (62) – all of those classes are paid; Weiss adds that this expansion of BDSM communities and the proliferations of classes about BDSM practices are “tied to the late-capitalist expansion of self-help, training, and guidance industries focused on sex and romance” (74). Catherine Scott refers to how the “BDSM culture pays lip service to a community where everyone is equal, yet the reality is decidedly different” (160), the socio-economic status of the BDSM practitioner may not be explicitly relevant during a

scene, but the props they buy and the classes they enroll, matter. Scott narrates an event in which a guy she was seeing “kept emphasizing how tight money was for him, yet he kept spending the money to drive to kink events, pay the entry fee, and inevitably come away with yet another addition to his range of doming tools” (159). Many BDSM practitioners who considered themselves “old school” claim to miss the spontaneity in BDSM scenes, the practice without props or specific clothes (Weiss 67).

It is important, and necessary, to discuss and problematize BDSM practices. However, is also important not to condemn the practice. Rubin, as a practitioner of sadomasochism, reports how sadomasochism was demonized when she “came out” and assumed she was a feminist and a sadomasochist. Additionally, Rubin mentions how uncomfortable she felt when reading the feminist press, because she wondered “what vile picture of my sexuality will appear this month” (211). Although there are many points within BDSM practices that need to be deeply discussed, and are indeed problematic, the practitioners can question them and maybe subvert them.

Acknowledging the arguments existent about the debate on BDSM and feminism, and considering Butler’s statement about a non-reflective attitude toward sexual desire – including than sexual practices related to BDSM – I will follow Chancer’s argument about the need to rethink BDSM practices, focusing on how different people within BDSM may have distinct ways to address the practice. The starting point of the analysis is to consider arguments that acknowledge the existent works and discussions about BDSM – such discussions are carried out by feminist scholars, and there are controversies. Some scholars, as Gayle Rubin and Pat Califia, believe that women can be part of BDSM and still be feminists and fight against patriarchy. On the other hand, scholars as Audre Lorde and Diana Russel argue that when women consent to BDSM relations, they are reinforcing patriarchal values.

I will move beyond the existent debate about BDSM and arguments pro or con, and consider a third perspective to analyze BDSM practices, rethinking such practices. This perspective is built from the theory proposed by Lynn S. Chancer, in her article “From Pornography to Sadomasochism: Reconciling Feminist Differences” and Margot Weiss’ perspective presented in the book *Techniques of Pleasure: BDSM and the Circuits of Sexuality*, which will be discussed in the following chapter.

Considering the present context in which postfeminism is present in the media and entertainment, and its relation to the popularization of erotic novels, especially with BDSM thematic, this study will contribute to discussions about BDSM and feminism. What differs this study from other studies in the area is the aim to move beyond debate about BDSM by radical and libertarian feminists, and seek for a possibility to rethink BDSM practices.

2.1 BDSM and the uses of the erotic

Audre Lorde, in a chapter entitled “The Uses of the Erotic” (1984), discusses the erotic as a way of power, and how this power has been neglected to women, and “misnamed by men and used against women” (88). For Lorde the erotic is not a mere expression of sexuality, but a force that offers a new perspective towards life: women should live their lives to the fullest, and not settle for a bad marriage, a bad job or an empty life. As women, we are taught that eroticism is limited to the bed; therefore, we do not look for satisfaction in other areas of our lives, which can include the passion of writing a poem or singing a song, of being creative. When appropriating the erotic power for ourselves, we will not only have more joy to live, but we will share this joy with others; and “begin to demand from ourselves and from our life-pursuits that they feel in accordance with that joy which we know ourselves to be capable of” (Lorde 90). Erotic power is neglected to women because “women so empowered are dangerous” (88), women who want to feel joy are dangerous; women who are not afraid to live their lives to the fullest are dangerous; those are the women who will not “settle for the convenient, the shoddy, the conventionally expected, not the merely safe” (90).

The erotic provides knowledge about one’s deepest feelings, and by acknowledging such feelings, one will no longer be satisfied with suffering. Therefore, when a woman has knowledge of the erotic power, she will not accept oppression, nor will she be “docile and obedient” (90) – which contradicts roles in BDSM relations, in which one plays the role of submissive, and therefore obeys the dominant one. However, theoreticians such as Catherine Scott and Lewis Call argue that within BDSM relations the power is shared between practitioners (Scott 89; Call 12); Michel Foucault also adds to such discussions by stating that BDSM relations are a “strategic game” in which structures of power are acted up, providing sexual and bodily pleasure (169). Lorde clarifies that “[r]ecognizing the power of the erotic within our lives can give us

the energy to pursue genuine change within our world, rather than merely settling for a shift of characters in the same weary drama” (91).

By acknowledging their erotic power, women can search for joy, fulfillment, and explore their creativity, their passions, as well as their sexuality. By writing erotic works women are challenging the role imposed on them, the impression that women are more sentimental and therefore should not write about eroticism, or sexuality – as Alexandrian declared in his book about erotic literature. Saint-Martin reminds that before the 60’s there were few women who wrote within the erotic genre; she also mentions that since the 80’s the taboo on women’s sexuality has diminished, so more women started to produce erotic works (458).

In this time in which women are producing more erotic literature than men, such writings became part of Academia as well. The novel *Fifty Shades of Grey* started an erotic literature fever, mostly within BDSM themes, and a variety of scholars dedicated their time in analyzing the novel focusing on what was being reproduced, regarding women’s sexuality and BDSM. Although *Fifty Shades of Grey* helped with the popularization of BDSM, such practices have already been represented in literature, and the possibility to discuss the implications of such practices is not a new subject. Lewis Call points out that in 1940 the publication of Wonder Woman’s comics first introduced BDSM themes in literary fiction (1). Call reminds that when BDSM representations started to appear in fiction, in the 60s, many of them had a “male dominant/female submissive configuration. Neither men nor women switched. (...) Positions within the structure of erotic power were pre-determined according to a biologically essentialist principle” (22), which can be related with the arguments made by feminist scholars about the reproductions and reinforcement of patriarchal values related to BDSM. It was only in the 80s when “[t]hey offered BDSM as an option for gays, lesbians, straights, bisexuals and transgendered people” (22) regarding the representation of BDSM practices within literature for a broader readership, and it set the status of BDSM as an ethical practice. Call also argues that such representations, when set in a fictional world, “promise to liberate both sadistic and masochist desire, by providing a world in which one’s ability to hurt or to be hurt is limited only by imagination” (24) – which explains why a great variety of novels exploring the theme of BDSM can be considered too extreme, as the castle where the submissive ones are kept in *Story of O*, or the sexual slavery in *Beauty’s Kingdom*.

Call also argues that:

it is possible, via SF&F⁶ about BDSM, to transmit positive, sympathetic representations of kink to large and increasingly receptive audiences. (...) They allow mainstream America access to the language, symbols, rituals and ethics of BDSM. They do this while simultaneously de-pathologizing BDSM *and* allowing it to retain its transgressive identity. (Call 16)

Call's perspective about representations of BDSM in fiction is a bit naïve, first because BDSM is not necessarily transgressive – and I develop this discussion in the next chapter. Secondly, there are novels with BDSM thematic that do not necessarily de-pathologize the practice, – *Fifty Shades of Grey* is an example of it, due to the fact that Christian Grey, one of the main characters, who considers himself a master within BDSM, is shown as a man who was abused and dominated by an older woman, who initiated him in BDSM practices. Nevertheless, such novels do provide access to what BDSM means, its “language, symbols, rituals and ethics.” Call's arguments about erotic novels within a BDSM thematic does not problematize the practice, but assume it to be transgressive because it used to be marginalized. However, even while in the margins, the practice can internalize and reproduce values from the dominant culture – as power dynamics which consists in objectifying and humiliating the other.

There is a considerable number of academic works concerned with representations of BDSM and feminism in literature, dating from Marquis de Sade's narratives to *Fifty Shades of Grey* and so on. The scholar Angela Carter discusses Sade's female characters in the book entitled *The Sadeian Woman: an Exercise in Cultural History* (1979), observing how their sexuality is portrayed in Sade's writings. Throughout Carter's analysis of Sade's works, such as *Justine* (1791) and *Juliette* (1797), she concludes that “Sade (...) urges women to fuck as actively as they are able, so that powered by their enormous and hitherto untapped sexual energy they will then be able to fuck their way into history and, in doing so, change it” (27). Carter suggests that Sade's narrative regarding his female characters differed from other erotic writers of the time, claiming that “he was unusual in his period for claiming rights of free sexuality for women, and in installing women as

⁶Science Fiction and fantasy.

beings of power in his imaginary worlds” (36). Carter presents a reinterpretation of Sade’s novels, and analyzing them through a feminist perspective allowed the possibility of rethinking Sade’s work.

Pursuing the notion of rethinking literary narratives – which is one of the objectives of my research – in Anne Kustritz’s article entitled “Painful pleasures: Sacrifice, consent, and the resignification of BDSM symbolism in *The Story of O* and *The Story of Obi*,” the author proposes an analysis of the fan fiction⁷*The Story of Obi*, which is a reinterpretation of *Story of O* within a *Star Wars* theme. *The Story of Obi* is a “m/m lash”, which is a type of fan fiction that portrays a male/male sexual relationship, and Kustritz suggests that m/m lash “offer[s] different horizons of possibility for the representation of BDSM, and writing from each mode can offer valuable contributions to a project of rethinking and resignifying the sexual body” (4), because this type of fiction would not rely on “polarity of either biological or performative sexual difference” (4). Kustritz argues that female/female and male/male representations of BDSM relations disrupt “the notion that BDSM must rely on the supposedly irresolvable polarity of either biological or performative sexual difference” (4). However, feminist scholars discussing BDSM practices, such as Bat Ami Bar-On, already stated that BDSM practices, even when portrayed by lesbian or gay participants, “embodies the same values as heterosexual practices of sexual domination” (75), therefore, the gender or sexual orientation of the practitioners are not enough to change the meaning of the practice. Although Kustritz’s aim is to present a reinterpretation and resignification of BDSM practices, the arguments presented in her work can be debunked by feminist researchers concerned with BDSM practices. In order to provide a critical work on how BDSM practices can be rethought, I will acknowledge the existent works on the area of BDSM and feminism, and attempt to build from those arguments possibilities for different perspectives of the practice.

The scholar Amalia Ziv, in her article entitled “The pervert’s progress: An analysis of *Story of O* and the Beauty Trilogy,” also makes reference to the fictional setting mentioned by Musser; Ziv states that the *Sleeping Beauty Trilogy* is a fantasy; the plot is not placed in any specific place or time, and “the subjugation depicted is a total

⁷Fan fiction are stories written by fans based on characters and/or setting of fictional works.

experience for the protagonists, rather than a game or circumscribed situation within ordinary existence” (65). While in novels like *Fifty Shades of Grey* the BDSM scenario is only part of the sexual lives of the characters, in the *Sleeping Beauty* Trilogy their whole life takes place in a BDSM based society; “the system of erotic domination not only overlaps with the whole fictional world, but forms an organic part of the social and political system” (Ziv 24).

The scholars who were concerned in analyzing the *Sleeping Beauty* Quartet so far have focused on discussions about the BDSM representations and feminism regarding the representation of the characters in relation to BDSM practices, as Beauty’s submission and its relation to her pleasure – however, without analyzing them in relation to the debate between radical and libertarian feminists⁸. Angela Carter’s research focuses on the representation of the female characters, while my research will focus on the representations of BDSM practices in the novel in terms of the theoretical debates within feminism and the possibility of a non-dichotomous feminist reading of BDSM in the novel itself. Anna Kustritz proposes to analyze BDSM practices within her corpus, but her focus is not on moving beyond existent debates about BDSM and feminism. Thus, I will not only analyze BDSM representations, but seek for possibilities of rethinking BDSM practices within feminist studies, and there are not many critical and theoretical discussions focusing on this specific issue.

The main objective is to analyze the representations of BDSM in the novel *Beauty’s Kingdom*, and this objective will be achieved through specific ones, which are: to verify how these representations respond to the debate between radical and libertarian feminists on BDSM, and in which way they potentialize a reading of BDSM beyond the dichotomous debate, towards rethinking BDSM practices. With the aforementioned objectives in mind, my hypothesis is that the initial plot of *Beauty’s Kingdom* may reinforce some of the arguments made by scholars who are against BDSM – such as the reproduction of patriarchal values. But I also argue that the representations of sexual relations within *Beauty’s Kingdom* potentialize a reading of BDSM beyond the dichotomous debate between radical and libertarian feminists, towards rethinking BDSM practices. For this research, my procedures are a close reading of *Beauty’s Kingdom*, along with an analysis of the selected passages that will be significant to the

⁸Such as Lash (2008) and Ziv (1994).

development of the main objectives stated above. In order to analyze the BDSM representations on the novel *Beauty's Kingdom*, I will consider such representations to be BDSM scenes, following Margot Weiss analysis of BDSM scenes from distinct BDSM communities. Weiss argues that BDSM scenes may approach topics which are considered taboos, such as play with racial, ethnic, and national themes – but the way in which the participants decide to approach the theme can drastically change its meaning (189). The main difference between my analysis and Weiss's is that she analyses bodily performances, while I will focus on a literary representation.

3 BELLAVALTEN'S TREASURE

In this chapter I will analyze the novel *Beauty's Kingdom* in order to discuss how the BDSM representations in the novel respond to the debate between radical and libertarian feminists on BDSM. The fourth volume of the *Sleeping Beauty Quartet* presents a significant change in comparison to the first three volumes: the former Queen, Eleanor, has passed away, so the kingdom of Bellavalten must have a new ruler in order to continue its tradition of sexual slavery. A group of masters and mistresses who lived in the Kingdom, while Queen Eleanor was alive, goes after Beauty and Laurent, her husband, and beg them to be the new Queen and King of Bellavalten, because queen Eleanor herself left a letter in which she advises her friends to go after Beauty and Laurent, claiming that they should know how to keep the tradition alive. Beauty and Laurent were some of the few slaves who were brave enough to leave Eleanor's kingdom and never look back, and this was enough for them to gain Eleanor's respect – even though she decided to ignore their existence while she was alive. While serving the kingdom, every slave had to finish their training in a certain time – which was decided by Queen Eleanor – and then they were free to even remain in the castle as masters and mistresses, or return to their own kingdom. Beauty and Laurent are happily married and living a traditional and vanilla life – different from the time they served Queen Eleanor as sex slaves – and the request to rule Bellavalten catches them by surprise. Until both Beauty and Laurent admit to themselves that they miss the life in Bellavalten, Laurent remembers “[t]he secret memories of Queen Eleanor's pleasure gardens united us; we'd whispered on the pillow of those times – of lush bondage and titillating punishments” (Rice 23).

Beauty and Laurent decide to accept the request to rule Bellavalten, but they stipulate changes regarding the way in which the Kingdom is going to work – such as the decree that the slaves should be volunteers, and no longer obligated to serve the kingdom in order to pay for favors that Bellavalten may have done to other kingdoms. Beauty explains her decree:

It is my wish that slavery in the kingdom of Bellavalten should henceforth be voluntary, and that no tribute or trophy slaves should ever be demanded from its allies, and furthermore that all those slaves who want to leave the kingdom at accession to the throne be allowed to do so, with the appropriate rewards. (Rice 64)

Beauty's decrees are promising, and seem to hold a great perspective for the kingdom's future. Beauty behaves differently from the former Queen, and perhaps differently from what is expected from a Queen in Bellavalten. When Beauty assumes the throne of Bellavalten, many people from other kingdoms want to move to Bellavalten, people "who were hoping so desperately to be taken into Bellavalté's magnificent and engulfing world" (106).

The group who came after Beauty and Laurent, their former colleagues at Bellavalten, approve the changes suggested by them, and full of hope for a new kingdom, they return to Bellavalten.

3.1 The Kingdom of Bellavalten

The kingdom of Bellavalten holds the tradition of sexual slavery, in which people from any kingdom, nobles or not, can join the kingdom and serve as sexual slaves for the people from Bellavalten. Slaves have the free will to choose whether they want to be part of Bellavalten, but once they are in the kingdom, there is no option but to obey their masters and mistresses without questioning; while one of the new slaves is being interviewed and analyzed to be part of the kingdom, a master tells him that "dignity is also highly desirable [in a slave] – only you must remember that your masters and mistresses ultimately define what is dignified" (Rice 181). Therefore, the slaves are not free to control their own behavior, or to think for themselves, since their masters and mistresses own not only their body, but even the notion of what "dignity" means.

The slaves are property of the Kingdom; they belong to "the King and the Queen and the Court now, and all of the noble and gentfolk of this kingdom, and even to the common people and the peasants" (Rice

195). As properties, they are considered the “kingdom’s treasure” (72), because the tradition of erotic slavery in Bellavalten is exotic to people from other kingdoms, so Bellavalten daily welcomes visitants from different places, who wish to see the erotic slaves. Referring to the slaves as “treasure” is a euphemism, because what is done to the slaves is really close to prostitution. The slaves are an attraction for peasants from other kingdoms, and such peasants pay in order to enter Bellavalten and get to know the exotic and erotic slaves; Bellavalten’s economy is based on the profit that the slaves offer as an attraction. Being displayed on shelves in stores and whipped in public happens not only to humiliate and punish the slaves, but also as a tourist attraction. Besides using the slaves as objects for the masters and mistresses’ pleasure, slaves are also used as a way to profit and increase the kingdom’s economy. Such objectification goes beyond erotic games, and slaves cannot own any titles or lands, therefore, the profit is exclusively to the kingdom.

As part of the attractions, slaves are objectified. As the following passage demonstrates, it is common to see slaves as

footstools, and kneeling as pets beside their masters and mistresses. And then the spectacle of X crosses, to which spread-eagled slaves were bound with shining silver and gold cuffs at ankles and uplifted wrists, heads held in place with stately collars, and often crowned with flowers, genitals decorated in gold.(Rice 156)

The slaves’ objectification functions to reinforce that they are there to serve and please their masters. When they are not being used sexually they behave as objects and animals, to serve in any way they can, be it as footstools, ponies, or as an exhibition for the tourists who visit Bellavalten.

Dulcinea Pitagora mentions, in the article entitled “Consent vs. Coercion: BDSM Interaction Highlight a Fine but Immutable Line”, that in BDSM relations the power is shared, and although it may seem that some roles hold a position of power and control in relation to another – as in the case of a dominant/submissive relationship – this is not necessarily the case. However, throughout *Beauty’s Kingdom’s* narrative, the slaves are inferior in relation to the dominants, and constantly objectified and humiliated for the enjoyment of masters and mistresses only, as the following passage demonstrates:

I saw a place where female slaves were kneeling on a shelf, their hindquarters bared, of course, to the crowd, who bought three and four yellow balls at a time to hurl at them to see who might strike the heart of the target, which was, naturally, the anus of the slave. The backside of these unfortunates was painted with brightly colored target stripes in what seemed like a thick adhesive paste, and I soon saw that some of the balls stuck to the targets in question, and the players argued spiritedly about who was better than whom in scoring at the game. (Rice 131)

The passage above is an example of the humiliating situations the slaves are put through; the character Dmitri, who is watching such scene, thinks to himself that “it wasn’t the worst punishment for a slave, but [he]knew those subjected to it would feel a thrilling shame nevertheless” (131). His thought demonstrates that, as a dominant, he is aware of the shame the slaves feel when put under humiliating situations; the insertion of the term “thrilling” works as an indicative that the slaves enjoy their punishment. Throughout the passages in which the slaves are being spanked and punished, the indicatives that they may be feeling pleasure and excitement with the extreme situations they are put into are perceived, as in the following passage:

Liberating, being bound like that, my wrists up and far apart, my ankles near the base of the arms of the cross![...] I was there for hours in a swoon. I tell you, it was a positive swoon. [...]But I was so sublimely helpless, Brenn. So free. (Rice 211-12)

The passage above is from Sybil, a new slave who is starting her training in Bellavalten. Sybil is excited with the punishment imposed on her by a Captain, however, the Captain punishes her only to know how much pain she can handle – her pleasure is a consequence of the scene, not the purpose of it. It is not a relationship in which each person engaged has the same power, the same capacity to negotiate or make requests. The indifference from the dominants to the slaves’ pleasure is emphasized through the fact that the slaves cannot demonstrate enjoyment, as it is noticed with Blanche, a slave who is being touched by the Queen: “she would die before she let the pleasure crest, die before she disappointed the Queen” (94) – to demonstrate her pleasure is to disappoint the Queen, because a slave is only an object that provides pleasure, never the receiver.

Besides not being allowed to demonstrate pleasure and presenting the punishments as something the slaves enjoy, the slaves are encouraged not to reflect on their situation, as Dmitri is reminded of his time as a slave in the kingdom:

Obeying, submitting, that is what I'd found hard in my service under Queen Eleanor (...). But being harnessed, with one's arms bound tight to one's back, with a bit in my mouth? That had made everything profoundly simple. And if only I'd been allowed a set of gold silk blinders, covering my eyes, covering my gaze, covering my tears, that would have made it all even easier. I'd love being a pony. One didn't have to think, one didn't have to submit. It was all done for me. (Rice 122)

Differently from the slaves who would do anything to please their masters and mistresses, Dmitri does not see slavery and submission as gratifying, but as a duty made easy by not having to think.

Maneesha Deckha mentions how acts in BDSM have as main purpose to please and arouse all participants, providing pleasure for them (137); but in *Beauty's Kingdom* there are many moments of pain and humiliation in which the only purpose is to punish the slaves. Catherine Scott, Carol Truscott, Pitagora and Deckha claim that BDSM practices are related to pleasure and arousal to every participant involved in the scene; in *Beauty's Kingdom*, the slaves go through pain and humiliation for the enjoyment of the dominant only. One of the masters, who is training Sybil, thinks to himself that he needed to "remind her of her nakedness, of her hopelessness, and of her great desire to please" (255). Sybil's pleasure is not important, but the wish to punish and humiliate her is emphasized and encouraged.

Lewis Call, author of *BDSM in America Science Fiction and Fantasy*, claims that "mutual desire means that kink is co-operative, not competitive" (12) the pleasure of all the participants, regardless of their role, is taken into account. There are few passages in which mutual desire is taken into account throughout the narrative; the slaves are repeatedly whipped and beaten for punishment only. A Captain, responsible for the slaves' punishments, tells what happens to slaves who are not well-behaved: "let's just say his backside and legs would be the color of burgundy wine, and his face would be so wet you would think it freshly enameled" (Rice 152) when beating the slaves to punish them, the dominants are concerned only with their own pleasure, and not

providing a pleasant situation for the slaves, but controlling their behavior through violence.

In a passage in which Dmitri is spanking Barbara, his first slave, the spanking is narrated as: “and then in *a fury*, I began to spank her with it, spank her hand and fast (...) until she screamed and sought to muffle her scream in the covers” [italics added] (Rice 171). The feeling of anger that comes from Dmitri, spanking her with fury, breaks with the erotic value of the scene – he is not turned on, but angry, and directing his anger to Barbara by spanking her. Barbara’s point of view of the scene is not presented in the narrative, only Dmitri’s feelings, of anger, and, later, of exhilaration. The only reference to Barbara’s feelings is her “soft sobbing cries” (171) – no pleasure and no excitement.

3.1.1 Consent

When debating BDSM – mostly within a feminist scope – it is common to those who advocate pro BDSM to use “consent” as a strong argument to differentiate BDSM from abuse. Every BDSM relation must start with consent, involving people who are aware of what BDSM means and what they are inclined to do – but consent is not irrevocable.

Famous novels with a BDSM thematic – like Sade’s, *Story of O* and even *The Sleeping Beauty Quartet* – do not demonstrate negotiations or use of safe words. In *Story of O* there is a passage about consent, from O’s Master, but it is a problematic one; O’s Master says “It’s because it’s too easy for you to consent that I want from you something you can’t possibly consent to” (Réage 48). As it can be noticed in the previous passage, consent is basically ignored – and for the other novels cited, there is not any passage related to negotiation – besides the existence of a contract in *Beauty’s Kingdom*, which is not negotiated by the dominant and submissive; the submissive simply has to sign it and agree to the terms.

The acronym “SSC” (safe, sane and consensual) was created in 1983, by David Stein, a member of New York’s Gay Male S/M Activists, and it became a slogan for the BDSM practiced nowadays (Stein 2). Therefore, it might be understandable that novels published before SSC became acceptable do not consider important to show explicit consent in their narratives. I mentioned how *Fifty Shades of Grey* contributed to BDSM discussions in the popular culture, but it also differs from previous novels of the theme because it shows explicitly what a BDSM relationship is like, presenting terms as “dominant” and

“submissive”, and even a contract, to represent the importance of consent.

The issue of consent is delicate within BDSM relationships, and when the premise of the relation is that one of the participants is a mere object whose function is to serve without questioning, as is the case of the slaves in *Beauty's Kingdom*, it is problematic to take consent seriously, since there is a clear-cut distinction between those in power – masters and mistresses – and those who are servants – slaves. Additionally, since the slaves do not have the possibility to negotiate the relation, only signing a standard contract, the novel does not follow the SSC (safe, sane, and consensual) motto. The relations presented among masters/mistresses and slaves in *Beauty's Kingdom* do not follow Dulcinea Pitagora's suggestions about shared power within BDSM relations, since the possibility to negotiate is not a reality for the slaves, and, as showed in the last section, their pleasure and well-being is not taken into account.

As previously mentioned, there are passages in which the slaves feel pleasure while being punished, and by describing the slave's suffering as something positive, masters/mistresses are exempt from negotiating consent, respecting boundaries, or caring about the slave's wellbeing at all. The scholar Carol Truscott emphasizes the importance of the dialog existent in sadomasochist relationships: the negotiation of boundaries, the roles to be assigned to each member, and the use of safe words. There is no dialog nor any kind of negotiation in Bellavalten, only a standard document the slaves must sign, stating that there would be “no cutting, burning, harming the skin, the organs, the health of a slave, and so forth” and the promises that the slaves “would be well fed, well groomed, and allowed plenty of sleep and so forth and so on” (190); the slaves are taken care of so they stay healthy, not because masters and mistresses are concerned with their health, but because they are a property of the kingdom, and, therefore, must be in good condition to be used by dominants.

A single contract cannot ensure consent for an entire relationship: consent is not something that once given cannot be taken back (Scott 92). The standard contract signed by the slaves also says that a slave is “received now for no less than two years' service, and once that probationary period was past, [the slaves] would continue in that service, not to be released on any account” and the only situation in which they would be released is if the King and Queen found them unfit and exiled them (Rice 190). Call mentions that BDSM participants

“must be old enough to understand what they are consenting to, reasonably sober, and free of *coercive pressures*” (12) (*italics added*). The exile imposed on their contract as punishment if the slaves do not fulfill the masters and mistresses’ expectations is a high price to pay – the slaves leave their families and their own kingdom to serve in Bellavalten, and once they are accepted in Bellavalten, they have to give up their titles and lands. Therefore, the contract itself is coercive, because for the slaves it is not a simple matter of wishing to remain in the kingdom or not; if they leave the kingdom, they leave without anything. Such situation can be compared with Slavery.

Hierarchies

Amalia Ziv states that the *Sleeping Beauty* trilogy ends in a disappointing way: the heterosexual, monogamist marriage; and “fixates the male and female in their traditional roles as sadist and masochist respectively, thus preserving the traditional gender-power alignment” (72). Although Beauty becomes Queen in *Beauty’s Kingdom*, her role as submissive continues to be her main personality trait. She struggles to fulfill her role as dominant during the entire narrative, since she can only submit to her husband, and act as dominant with the rest of the kingdom – she is also protagonist in distinct passages portraying vanilla sex with other men. Even though Beauty tells Laurent “that is the way of Bellavalten, that a woman may have what a man has, and men and women must serve men and women” (Rice 33), she only has sexual relations with other people if she dominates them or has vanilla sex, maintaining her fidelity, and her submissiveness, to Laurent. By the end of the narrative, she finally surrenders to her “true self,” which is to be submissive:

And I am your sovereign (...) and I am naked before you because I choose to be, and yes, I am the kingdom. I am you all. I will serve you always; I will give you all. Demand what you will. Need what you will. This is my destiny, my submission, my true surrender. (Rice 356)

Beauty’s passage reflects the personality traits that are built for her through the narrative, of passiveness and submission. When she states that this is her destiny, it adds to the novel’s notion that the characters are inherently submissive or dominant. The narrative of *Beauty’s Kingdom* may represent slaves as intrinsically submissive, but as Hopkins reminds “[t]he personality can be coerced into constructing

desires that serve other's interests" (128). In order for BDSM to be safely practiced, ensuring that each person involved in the relation will feel pleasure and have their boundaries respected is necessary to resignify such practice.

Beauty remembers the time she served Bellavalten and tells Laurent that

I loved so many as well. I loved Tristan, and I loved Captain Gordon, and I loved you, yes, you. I loved the cruel innkeeper who punished me with such disdain. Mistress Jennifer Loxley. (...) I loved the strange men and women of the Sultan's kingdom. I loved Lexius, the Sultan's steward who was so strict with us, and yet... We were swimming in love in those times. (Rice 58)

By stating all this love she feels for her colleagues, being them dominant or submissive, Beauty is presented as a passionate character, a queen that would not be severe; differently from the former queen, Eleanor, who "had no respect for lords and ladies who voluntarily gave themselves up to slavery and she took no interest in such volunteers ever after" (77). For Eleanor, wishing to be a slave demonstrated weakness and inferiority – such Queen would never really show concern with the slaves of the kingdom. I do not perceive Beauty's passivity as weakness; on the contrary, her love for her subjects could be the factor to be the necessary change in the kingdom's tradition, especially regarding the inferior way in which slaves are treated.

Beauty has to be dominant to perform her role as Queen, but deep down, her destiny is to be submissive. Laurent, her husband, is dominated a few times, but even when submitting he is strong, so it is presumed that his destiny is to dominate. The novel maintains the traditional gender power alignment in the main characters, and their speech is constantly associated with their true self, or their destiny, reproducing social constructions of women being traditionally assigned as submissive and men as dominant, as perceived in a passage in which Laurent is talking with Beauty about the duties they will have when being Queen and King and, as he listens to her, he thinks to himself "I wanted her crushed beneath me again, helpless and yielding" (Rice 59); Laurent's thought is not about giving pleasure to Beauty or satisfying her, it is a egoistical concern to have Beauty passive and humiliated under him – even though she is his wife and the one he loves.

As previously mentioned, Laurent is depicted as strong even

when submitting to another mistress. Lady Eva is asked to dominate Laurent, because he is such a hard man to dominate – other masters and mistresses have been called before Lady Eva, and none of them were good enough to satisfy Laurent’s wish to be dominated. While she is dominating him, her thoughts are “he was surely the most splendid human being I’d ever beheld (...) the cock though not monstrously long, no, a comfortable size, was exceptionally thick, rising out of its nest of moist dark hair as if a sculptor had made it for the gods” (Rice 40).

Eva reminds the King that “I’m not frightened of you at all. I’m in love with you. Now stand up quickly” (40), and he does as she commands. Lady Eva does not demonstrate concern with the fact that she is subduing the King, and goes on

Lifting his chin with my left hand, I rained down on him the strongest spanking blows I could deliver. I let loose with all my strength, paddling him again and again with the full force of my arm. At once he struggled to be quiet, helpless little gasps escaping his lips, and as I continued to spank him as hard as I could and as fast as I could, he shifted, struggled, tightened, and finally shuddered all over in his struggle to remain still. (Rice 43)

Even though Lady Eva was the dominant in this specific scene, her thoughts about Laurent demonstrate how she sees him as exceptional and incredible; and differently from the treatment towards the slaves, in which they were continually punished for their behavior and little concern was showed to their well-being, Lady Eva warns Laurent that “you don’t have to be a bad boy to deserve punishments like this” (43). While the slaves were humiliated and physically injured as punishment to control their behavior, Laurent’s domination is completely about pleasure – for him and for Lady Eva – when she states that he does not have to be a bad boy, it contrasts to the reasons the slaves were punished, which happened every time they misbehaved or did not fulfilled their masters’ and mistresses’ expectations.

The passage of Laurent’s submission is related to the notion that BDSM scenes can be separated from reality, that it is just a role play; Laurent is subdued and dominated by Lady Eva, but when the scene finishes, he goes back to the position of King, and even those who once dominated him, owe him respect. So, there is not only gender hierarchy – as Beauty submitting only to Laurent because he is her husband, while Laurent submits and dominates other men and women throughout the narrative – but also class hierarchy, since the slaves from Bellavalten are not treated the same way as the nobles who wish to submit. The slaves

live every moment of their lives as slaves, with no titles or land, working to satisfy their master and mistress's needs; but Laurent chooses to submit once or twice, a privilege he has conceded to himself – as Beauty, who at the end of the narrative assumes her role as submissive, and, although the novel ends at this point and it is not possible to know what will happen to her, she will hardly lose her Kingdom or be deprived from governing due to her role as submissive; after all, she is not a slave, but the Queen. This limited privilege of being submissive and still have a position of power is only limited to the Queen and King; Lord Stefan, a noble resident of Bellavaltan, asks Beauty's permission to be submissive, since he does not feel comfortable in being a dominant – she allows it, provided that he will give up his titles and lands. To be a slave, one cannot own anything, because the slave depends entirely on the kingdom to survive, and because of that, the slaves have their choices and freedom even more limited. It is possible to notice the distinction between slave and master/mistress when Tristan proposes the creation of a place “where lords and ladies may go and no one will be the wiser as to whom is master or mistress” (75), to which Beauty agrees, and feels excited for. Such place enables the masters and mistresses to be slaves, but only as a fantasy or fetish, since they will not give up any lands or titles. I reinforce my argument that for the nobles the sexual slavery is about pleasure and power, while the slaves depend exclusively on their masters and mistresses, and their role is to serve.

The reproduction of gender stereotypes is not limited to the main characters, Beauty and Laurent. Dmitri is observing the kingdom and he sees “gentlemen coarsely enjoying their slaves at their tables, though ladies did not indulge themselves in the same crude way” (Rice 160), and in another moment of the narrative some masters are discussing the training of one specific slave who demonstrated to be more problematic than others, and therefore in need of a more intense training, so “he is going to require great severity and I suspect that severity must come from a man” (280). Such passages add to the reinforcement of gender stereotypes, mostly connected with what Miller and Harriet Lerner explain as being part of social constructions regarding dominant groups over subordinate ones, as the notion that women are passive, obedient and weak. It also corroborates to the existent debate about BDSM and feminism, adding to Butler's argument that BDSM has not overcome heterosexual power dynamics (172).

Sarah Lash, in the essay “Intellectualizing Smut: The Role of Tradition in Anne Rice’s ‘Sleeping Beauty’” states that even though Beauty plays a passive role, this role is not exclusively hers. Many other characters, Princesses, Princes, men or women, also play passive roles. In the same way that men and women can equally play the role of dominants, the supreme ruler of the kingdom is a woman, a Queen. However, the subjugation of the other, the undermining and the humiliation are part of patriarchal beliefs, the way in which men believe they can treat women, and reproducing such values does not have to be necessarily related with the gender of who is dominant and who is submissive. As Bat Ami Bar-On states, even a non heterosexual relationship “embodies the same values as heterosexual practices of sexual domination” (75); whether the dominant is male or female does not matter, since there is a reinforcement of gender hierarchy, in which one is considered inferior to the other.

Lash also argues that, in the novel, Rice makes Beauty’s passiveness and submission into something for the character’s own pleasure (71), but as Diana Russel observes, there are social constructions imposing that women are submissive to men in daily life, and consenting with BDSM practices that reinforce the notion of women as submissive could be just an internalization of this patriarchal belief (177). In the first book of *The Sleeping Beauty Quartet*, Beauty is forced to go to Bellavalten and to be part of the system of sexual slavery – I do not read her submissiveness and passiveness only as providing pleasure to her, but as an internalization of her role as slave, and therefore, passive and submissive. Jean Baker Miller discusses how a dominant group – men, white people – influences the behavior of “subalterns” – women, people of color. Miller explains that a “dominant group inevitably has the greatest influence in determining a culture’s overall outlook” (47), which is related to the notion that, for example, “women are inherently passive, submissive, and docile” (47). Miller mentions that the continuous repetition of such notions makes subordinates absorb and internalize what the dominant group reproduces (49). In *Beauty’s Kingdom*, the dominant group is composed of masters and mistresses, while the slaves are subordinates. Beauty, Laurent and other characters, have started their journey in Bellavalten as slaves, and the choice to continue the tradition of sexual slavery in the kingdom is an internalization of the rules and hierarchies they have learned to respect while they were slaves.

One aspect considered positive in the three initial volumes of *The Sleeping Beauty Quartet* was the fluidity of the slaves' sexual preferences, as Ziv mentions:

[t]he sexual ideology which the text projects is that different people may indeed have different preferences in terms of their sexual objects and the type of role and of acts they incline toward, but these preferences do not carry any significant weight and are, at any rate, quite fluid and liable to change (Ziv 69).

The sexual preference fluidity is not present in the narrative of *Beauty's Kingdom*. Instead of being able to have relations as dominant or submissive, Beauty and Laurent decree that there would be no "switching," one must assume one role and maintain it for the rest of their lives, unless they leave the kingdom. By prohibiting people from switching, the narrative loses its representation of the fluidity of sexual preferences, and falls into a more traditional alignment, in which a person can only assume one role, or one preference. The characters still maintain relations with men and women, but their role as submissive/dominant has to remain the same. When the characters have to limit their roles as either dominant or submissive, it reinforces the narrative's attempt to present submissiveness or dominance as inherent to the characters – presuming that they cannot switch because, deep down, they only have one true destiny, and only one role to follow.

4 LONG LIVE THE QUEEN

In this chapter I will analyze the novel *Beauty's Kingdom* in order to achieve my second objective, which is to discuss BDSM representations that corroborate with the existent debate on BDSM and feminism, and possible BDSM representations that move beyond the existent debates and thus rethink BDSM practices. In the first subsection, I'll deal with characters that represent a change in the way the tradition of erotic slavery is carried in *BellaValten*, following Sarah Michelle Raab and Ritchie and Baker's suggestion that BDSM practices are influenced by its practitioners, and those practitioners can either naturalize or problematize issues such as gender, race and class. In the second subsection, I will focus on Margot Weiss's method of analyzing BDSM scenes, which is through a political reading, considering the

discursive ideological production, in order to observe if such scenes represent a possibility to rethink BDSM practices, and if they present a political reading of the themes approached, rather than dealing with such themes only as an erotic fantasy that should not be problematized.

4.1 Be the change

The author Sara Michelle Raab carried out research about BDSM groups and its participants, focusing on how the practitioners perceive gender within their groups, if there is perpetuation or subversion of sexism. In Raab's article, entitled "The Perpetuation and Subversion of Gender-Power Dynamics in BDSM – An Interview Study in Central Pennsylvania," she points out the fact that when asked about normative gender performance, some participants declared that there is a certain encouragement to reproduce normative performances of gender, since a man must play the role of a man, and a woman the role of a woman. Raab explains that such perspective is related to a reinforcement of the dominant culture (33), and even though these people are part of a BDSM community, they bring to BDSM the views they have about society as a whole. Another aspect that corroborates how the participants will practice BDSM is the fact that the group interviewed by Raab was mostly composed by heterosexual people. She explains that, in other types of BDSM communities, in which cis⁹ men, straight practitioners and vanilla people¹⁰ are not accepted, tend to be more acceptant towards "gender fucking"¹¹. The participants who positioned themselves as being against the subversion of gender norms also declared that they feel like they should accept it, since BDSM is about acceptance. One of the interviewees said that "Unfortunately, as in the vanilla world, there are still narrow-minded people in the community, too. Ya [sic] know, 'Your kink is not as good as my kink'" (Raab 36). All the participants of this BDSM community being interviewed by Raab associated dominance with masculinity and submissiveness with femininity (37). Such view reinforces gender dynamics existent in our society, as well as patriarchal values. It also emphasizes how the practitioners influence the practice itself; BDSM communities which do not accept heterosexual people and cis men tend to be more transgressive towards gender dynamics, while in

⁹ People who identify with the sex they were born.

¹⁰ People who do not practice BDSM.

¹¹ The act of disrupting expected gender roles.

communities composed exclusively of heterosexual and cis participants gender roles tend to be reinforced. Raab suggests that BDSM may offer a great space for participants to “play with gender,” but in communities in which gender roles are reinforced, such play does not have place to happen (39). Although all participants related dominance with masculinity and submissiveness with femininity, they also understand that there is an exchange of power in the relationship, since the submissive is the one who dictates how far can the dominant go (54). According to Raab, “In the community, a submissive, regardless of gender, must be active and vocal in order to negotiate a scene or relationship and to stop play when it may go further than desired” (55).

Another theme discussed in Raab’s interviews was how the participants relate to feminism. The majority of them would present a discourse related to feminism, but they would not use the term “feminism” or consider themselves feminists. Only two participants actually declared themselves as feminists, but they said it was hard to reconcile their feminist identity with their BDSM practice (since they were submissive women) (53). One participant even stated that the BDSM scenario does not need feminism, since it is “gender equal” (56) – what cannot be considered true since, as previously mentioned, the participants reinforce gender stereotypes. The context of BDSM can still provide a safe environment for transgression, because even the participants who claimed to be against the subversion of gender roles, also claimed that they understand that BDSM is about acceptance – or at least it should be (Raab 59). Raab acknowledges that the participants of her research show a low acceptance with gender subversion, but, in a way, they show more acceptance than the dominant culture, and “the instances of non-acceptance and devaluing of non-normative gender roles reminds SMers¹² that we still need to work for a more accepting subculture” (Raab 59).

With the popularization of BDSM, many participants identify themselves as practitioners and feminists. BDSM practitioners, with new ideologies and persistence, can influence BDSM practices and collaborate to make BDSM transgress the limits of patriarchy, giving other perspectives and meaning to the scenes, reinforcing that in BDSM relations power should be exchanged, the master and the submissive are both in control.

¹²Practitioners of sadomasochism.

The scholars Ani Ritchie and Meg Baker wrote the article “Feminist SM: A contradiction in terms or a way of challenging traditional gendered dynamics through sexual practice?” in which they investigate a group of women who are BDSM practitioners, and the relation of those women with feminism. The women varied in age, time they were engaged in BDSM scenes, and sexual orientation. Among those participants, the majority of them declared themselves as switchers – they could perform the role of top or bottom, and the majority also identifies as bisexual (9). This brief introduction is already enough to perceive the difference between this group of practitioners and the group interviewed by Raab. In the later, all participants were heterosexual, and would relate domination with masculinity and submissiveness with femininity. On the other hand, the group interviewed by Ritchie and Baker demonstrate to be more receptive to the subversion of gender norms and the fluidity of such norms, since they may have relations with men and women, as top or bottom.

In comparison to the group interviewed by Raab, Ritchie and Baker’s group also agreed that who usually controls a BDSM scene is the bottom, and not the top. They suggested that SM is “not about the bottom, particularly the stereotype of a woman lying back and going ‘do what you want, master’” (Ritchie and Baker 13). Top and bottom should be able to talk and negotiate the desires of both. The participants also believe in the power of BDSM to be transgressive with gender norms, and one of the participants talked about “SM enabling men to cry and experience vulnerability, and of her experiences of being a woman who penetrates rather than is penetrated, and who can ensure physical control over her male partners through the use of bondage” (Ritchie and Baker 13).

Those women, feminist and BDSM practitioners, also talked about BDSM scenes they experienced with men who positioned themselves as anti-feminist, and who would only play the role of dominant. They said that they would fear men who would only play as tops, and avoid scenes with them. Participants like the ones interviewed by Ritchie and Baker may represent the potential that BDSM has to subvert norms and be a transgressive practice, while the group interviewed by Raab demonstrates that even in contexts such as BDSM scenarios, considered transgressive or as a “subculture,” the participants can keep reproducing a dominant discourse.

BDSM practices are inserted in a patriarchal society. Therefore,

it is understandable why such practice undermines women's strength, reproducing patriarchal values – but what I argue is that it is necessary to rethink BDSM practices and see them under a new perspective, considering that if the BDSM community is composed mainly by cis men, as an example of the dominant culture, the practice will reflect their values, such as seeing the submissive as weaker than the dominant and women as inferior. For BDSM scenes to be transgressive, it requires people who are willing to transgress gender stereotypes and the dominant culture as a whole. Therefore, rethinking BDSM practices would require the notion that master and submissive have equal power in the relation – being submissive is not about being inferior, but a sexual preference related to BDSM roles. Both master and submissive having equal power would mean that there is concern with the pleasure of all practitioners, regardless of their roles, as well as respect for each other's boundaries. Another factor related with rethinking BDSM practices is the possibility of transgressing gender roles, as mentioned in Ritchie and Baker's interview with the BDSM community composed mainly by lesbians and switchers.

Raab's research, as well as Ritchie and Baker's, suggests that BDSM practitioners will influence the group they are inserted in, and it impacts on how the practice will be developed; however, *Beauty's Kingdom* is set in a monarchy, and monarchies have their leaders – the King and the Queen – who dictate the kingdom's rules. It cannot be assumed that, in BDSM communities, all practitioners hold the same power. Catherine Scott points out that some practitioner's complaints about abuse in BDSM scenes – as breaking agreements that were negotiated between the practitioners – are not taken seriously because the abuser is “a respected person in the community” (99), and those respected people have more influence on the practitioners of their community. In my analysis, Beauty and Laurent are read as practitioners who have stronger influence on their group.

The first character I am going to discuss is Dmitri, a former slave who has returned to Bellavaltén, this time to act as a master. While Dmitri is walking around Bellavaltén, he meets a slave named Barbara, who is being punished in the public whipping at the village. She was being punished because she did not behave as a proper slave, just as he was not used to being a well-behaved slave, so he gives her a coin – one of the traditions of the kingdom is to give coins to the slaves after their punishments – saying “Bad girl. Take it from a bad boy. I know” (149), which demonstrates Dmitri's empathy towards this slave. Dmitri decides

to ask the queen for Barbara to be his slave, because he identifies with her; Dmitri understands the burdens of being considered a bad slave, so his request to have Barbara as his own slave represents not only his identification with her, but the way in which he treats her demonstrates his guilt towards the kingdom's tradition, since he does not act as an average master – punishing the slaves and feeling no remorse about it. Barbara is sent to Dmitri's place, and he does what is expected from a master: spans her. However, as he finishes the spanking session, he covers her face with kisses, and then realizes that he is crying while thinking to himself “I wanted you, I am you” (171). Dmitri's thought of “I am you” relates to other moments of the narrative, as when he is watching slaves being punished and thinks “How many times had I been ordered to do that, and to stand silent for the inspection of the most intimate sort?” (117), he also remembers the punishments he suffered, “it was all tangled. I felt myself, naked, sore, crying, being rushed to the pillory” (137), and when he meets a young slave and kisses the boy's face, comparing himself to the boy “he was my height. Utterly passive. When I was new, I'd trembled or shaken every time I was touched or kissed” (218). Dmitri is the only character in the novel who feels empathy towards the slaves; not only because he used to be a slave himself – after all, characters such as Beauty and Laurent also have been slaves, but they do not have the same empathy as Dmitri – but because he actually feels annoyed by the punishments, and sorry for the slaves. Dmitri's discomfort regarding the kingdom's rule that, if a slave is not considered suitable for the kingdom, she/he has to leave in exile, is exemplified when he thinks “if this boy does not please, he will not only be whipped for the next six months, harder and longer and more angrily than other slaves who do please, but sent away when the period of testing is over” (218) – Dmitri's thoughts about the kingdom may not explicitly show his discomfort or annoyance, but the fact that he is the only character who thinks about the punishments indicates that he does not naturalize it.

Dmitri does not feel comfortable with the punishments and the role he has to perform, but he is not powerful enough to change anything; therefore, he just reproduces what he was taught to do; as Jean Baker Miller argues, dominant groups influence behaviors and beliefs. Dmitri is part of a dominant group, since he is noble and a master; therefore, he repeats values from the dominant culture – he reproduces the belief that the slaves have to submit to him, and that his function is

to punish and discipline them; however, as he has sex with Barbara, he is concerned with her pleasure, as the following passage shows

I pressed my tongue into her, tasting her delicious smoking and fragrant juices. I lapped at her juices. Her hips rode up and down helplessly under me. With my mouth over her clitoris, over her gasping sex, I knew she had no control, and I stabbed at her clitoris with my tongue until she came without stinting. On and on she came, abandoned to the pleasure. (Rice 168)

The passage above indicates that Dmitri is in control of the sexual act, as in “I knew she had no control”, but even while in control, he is concerned with giving pleasure to Barbara.

Still on the topic of characters who have the power to change the kingdom’s tradition, the Queen, Beauty, also demonstrates some concern with the slaves. When Beauty first meets the slave Blanche, who would rather die than disappoint the Queen, Blanche cannot control herself, so she ends up having an orgasm in front of the Queen. Instead of punishing Blanche, as other masters may have done, Beauty calms her down by saying “You have pleased me very much, precious Blanche. I shall always love you, love you especially for this night” (97). However, Beauty’s constant demonstration of love with her slaves is not related to empathy or concern with their wellbeing, but to the narrative’s attempt to show that Beauty is not suitable to act as a mistress, she is not dominant, but submissive.

The punishments suffer some alterations after Beauty becomes Queen. In the main square of the village there are constant whippings, and specific lashers who are responsible for it. In one of the whipping sessions, Dmitri sees a lasher who “crooned to the slave bent over his apron now, tousling his hair, and stroking his back, and patting his upturned backside gently” (142), this kind of treatment is called “aftercare” in BDSM practices. The author Catherine Scott mentions the importance of the aftercare after an intense BDSM session (14); it shows concern with the submissive and her/his wellbeing; such act was not present in Eleanor’s kingdom – the slaves were supposed to be beaten and suffer, while masters and lashers punished them, demonstrating no emotional involvement with the slaves.

Another character who does not naturalize every kingdom’s tradition and makes an effort to problematize them is Tristan, a noble and master in the kingdom, who questions one of the sexist arguments

made by another character, who says “I suspect that severity must come from a man,” to which Tristan asks back “But shouldn’t he be taught to obey both men and women?” (280). In order to rethink BDSM practices, that in the novel would be the kingdom’s tradition regarding the erotic slaves, it is important to consider not only the practice itself, but the political choices and beliefs of the practitioners. Although Tristan does not feel empathy towards the slaves as Dmitri does, his questioning about a sexist statement could represent a possibility to rethink the kingdom’s traditions, especially those that reinforce the notion that women are submissive and passive, while men are dominant and strong – as presented in the previous chapter. I say that Tristan’s questioning *could* represent a possibility to rethink the kingdom’s practice because it would only happen if his questioning was taken further and, in fact, discussed or considered in other moments of the narrative; however, his questioning is discarded by Lady Eva’s answer: “once he’s broken and trained [...] he will submit to either with good manners” (280), and the subject is rejected as soon as the passage is over.

The novel presents passages in which gender roles are challenged. Once Queen and King, Beauty and Laurent would have relations with the slaves of the kingdom, who would be there to serve and please them. The novel is set in a medieval time, and in medieval times the King could have relation with other women, as Beauty reminds Laurent (33); but Bellavalten is different from other kingdoms. As they discuss whether to accept the invitation, Beauty reminds Laurent that “that is the way of Bellavalten, that *a woman may have what a man has*, and men and women must serve men and women,” [italics added] (Rice 33) in order to make it clear that, if they go to Bellavalten, Beauty would have the right to have relations with other people, what makes Laurent hesitate for a moment. Beauty states that “I will be the only Queen of your heart, and you the only king of mine, but the pleasures of the kingdom will be enjoyed by both of us” (33). In this passage Beauty emphasizes her wish – and her power – to be involved with other people, what confronts traditional monogamist relationships.

The question of gender roles is brought back in the narrative when Beauty finds out about a group of women who “passed as men, as grooms, dressing as men, living as men” (251), so they were caught by the former Queen, Eleanor, and had to leave the kingdom in exile. This group wants to return to the kingdom, and it is Beauty’s decision to allow them or not, to which Beauty quickly answers “Why should they not live as men if they choose? [...] What harm have they done? So let

them do as they like.” (251). Although the characters no longer have the possibility to switch their roles as dominant and submissive, the narrative provides representations of gender fluidity; be it in the relationships of characters among themselves that is not necessarily aligned with heterosexual representations, and also in the portrayal of those women who wish to live as men. When Beauty allows those women to return to Bellavalten, she is representing a change in at least one of the kingdom’s rule: while Queen Eleanor exiled those women for not acting according to the kingdom’s expectations towards gender representativeness, Beauty is open to this group’s decision to live as men.

Gender representations are once more presented in the narrative when Beauty gets familiarized with the kingdom Khaharanka, where there are only women inhabitants, and where the queen “is a goddess [...]. She and her Court of women are held to be divine beings of unquestioned authority” (329). Differently from the continuous repetition of women as inherently submissive and men as inherently dominant, in the kingdom of Khaharanka women are strong and in positions of power. Moreover, men can be part of Khaharanka as well, but they have to drink a potion that gives them female features – at this point, the novel addresses gender subversion, presenting characters that have both male and female characteristics; as Beauty notices it, she thinks to herself: “I was staring at a gorgeous androgynous god” (332).

The possibility to rethink the practices of the erotic slave’s in Bellavalten is not strong enough when focusing on the characters that disrupt some of the kingdom’s traditions. Dmitri, the character with the strongest potential to represent a change, does not have enough power to influence his pairs; Tristan barely has a chance to question; and Beauty, the Queen, sees the slaves as “Bellavalten’s treasure,” those who provide money and sustain the economy of the kingdom, although the premise of her reign is to bring changes to Bellavalten – as the voluntary erotic slavery – she holds the main kingdom’s traditions, keeping slaves as tourist attractions and having little concern with their desires.

4.2 Political effects

Margot Weiss suggests that a political reading of BDSM must consider the social position of the practitioners, and the effects that a scene has on its participants – beyond the practitioners’ intentions. As Weiss argued, the practice is affect by its practitioners and their social context, and it can be “transformational when it connects the scene to

the social (...) and the audience must risk identification with the bodies and social imaginaries at play” (277). Since my analysis is focused on a literary representation of BDSM scenes, the identification is not on bodies, but on characters and narratives. Weiss also presents an approach considering rethinking BDSM practices, claiming that, in order to analyze a BDSM scene, it is necessary to consider elements such as “social location, audience reception, and discursive ideological production” (188). By analyzing BDSM scenes through those elements, Weiss argues that

making sex public can disrupt fantasies of autonomous individualism, personal pathology, individuated responsibility, the privateness of desire, or sex removed from the social. Sometimes, too, circuits can reproduce, reinforce, even establish forms of disavowal and unknowing that enable social privilege and help to justify it. There is no single reading of the SM scene, because scenes depend on the active production of the materiality of social differentiation by players, audiences, and readers. (230)

Some scholars define BDSM as a marginalized practice or a subculture, what does not mean that BDSM is inherently transgressive or politicized. Additionally, I corroborate Weiss’ perspective about the influence of BDSM scenes, which is to resist the question about how BDSM scenes subvert social power, but to focus on what are the political contexts and effects of such scenes (229). Sexuality needs to be discussed and problematized in relation to social contexts – as gender, race, and class – and not only as an escape (Weiss 231), after all, BDSM scenes reproduce social relations, be it in slavery, rape scenes, interrogatory scenes, and so on. This relation with a larger social context cannot be seen as mere sexual fantasy, if the participants choose to engage in such scenes, they need to be aware of what the practice may reproduce or reinforce – it can corroborate the dominant culture’s values, or question it via what Weiss calls “hot-button issues” (189); which is the way in which people who watch the BDSM scene – and for my research those are the readers – engage and identify with the participants of the scene, what effect it will cause on the viewers and readers. BDSM scenes may work as parody or hyperbole, which “can displace norms, exposing the non-naturalness, non-inevitableness, or indeterminacy of social power” (Weiss 191). In this section, I will focus specifically on the theme of slavery, and how the usage of terms related to slavery are presented in the novel, if they are problematized, politicized, or if they work as parody or hyperbole, as suggested by Weiss.

4.2.1 Slavery

The narrative of *Beauty's Kingdom* presents a variety of terms and settings related to slavery. The people responsible for whipping the slaves are called Captains and whipping masters; the usage of whipping appears repeatedly throughout the narrative as one of the main means to punish the slaves, as distinct passages exemplify. Lady Eva threatens Laurent while he is being dominated, saying "I'll whip you and your ankles and the soles of your feet" (48), so whipping is used as punishment for the submissive, as it can be noticed in Beauty's line: "It was where bad little boys and girls were spanked by a seated whipping master while the villagers gathered to gossip and drink" (92). In this passage, whipping is used as punishment, and also as a source of entertainment for the villagers. Dmitri remembers of the time he used to be part of such entertainment, describing the Public Turntable:

being brought up the ladder to it, and told to kneel over with my chin on the thick square wood post. The crowd had been hooting and cheering. I'd panicked, as always, and within seconds my hands had been placed in the small of my back, my wrists bound tight. The leather straps had gone over my calves binding me to the floor of the turntable, and the whipping master was laughing as he lifted the big wooden paddle in front of my face so I would see it". (Rice 110)

In Dmitri's passage about the Public Turntable it is possible to notice that it was not enjoyable to him, only to those watching him, and to the Captain who punishes him, who says: "you're giving the crowd a great show. You just keep struggling with all your might against those straps. But keep your chin on this post, or I'll let the crowd name the number of the blows" (112). Dmitri's description of his punishment causes discomfort, since he mentions how he would panic and the whipping master would only laugh, therefore, the reader can feel empathy for Dmitri, and disgust for his punishers and the people watching the scene, enjoying it. However, as previously mentioned, Dmitri is the only character who questions and reflects about his time as slave, the only one who describes punishments as negative. Other whipping sessions are described romantically, as the following: "[t]he little girl obeyed the whipping master submissively and almost gracefully, at once clasping her hands in the small of her beautifully arched back" (133), and later on "[s]he couldn't keep her calves still, or her feet; she was dancing, as they call it. She couldn't help it. Dancing" (133); the usage of terms such as "gracefully" and "beautifully" sets a mild tone to this whipping section, and when the narrator says that the girl was "dancing," what was supposed to be a punishment is ironically

turned into something graceful, and even enjoyable. When one slave is being prepared for her punishment, the whip masters notices that she is “wet,” and she reacts by thinking to herself that she could not control it, since the idea of being punished was enough to let her wet.

In another passage, the slave Becca is put in a pillory to spend the night – once again, a straight reference to slavery – and when her master goes check on her, she welcomes him, as he describes “licked my hand over and over with her pink tongue to show her complete adoration. (...) She’d be dripping with sweet juices when I’d finished with her” (278-279). Besides the aforementioned romanticized description of the whipping session through the perspective of a watcher, the later passage portrays the submissive as thrilled to be whipped.

By representing whipping sessions – especially those in pillories, by master whippings and Captains – the narrative not only naturalizes, but romanticizes slavery and the violence slaves went through; Tristan’s description of the whipping session is the only one in the novel that presents a negative perspective towards whipping is described as pleasant.

Within the humiliation the slaves went through, there is a tradition that corroborates to the so called “pony play¹³” existent in BDSM scenarios. During scenes related to pony play the submissive pretends to be an animal, and in Bellavalten it is common to have slaves serving as ponies. They live in stables, use butt plugs that look like tails, and even pull the Queen and King’s carriage. Beauty is fascinated by the idea of having slaves as ponies, and she states “I can well imagine a splendid stable of male and female ponies, and my own personal Royal coach being pulled away by a great team of female ponies” (Rice 68). One of the new slaves to join the kingdom, Sybil, is taken into the stables to become one of the Queen’s ponies – and as she is prepared, once again the narrative transforms a humiliating and painful situation into a pleasurable one, as the following passage demonstrates:

The pleasure was agonizing, and suddenly she felt all of her body singing in its harnesses, her bottom stinging from the paddling, her anus throbbing against the phallus, even the swishing hair of the tail tickling her inner thighs as the breeze stirred it and moved it. (Rice 262)

A whip Captain explains that if a male pony is not considered perfect and well-behaved, “let’s just say his backside and legs would be the color of burgundy wine, and his face would be so wet you would

¹³ “pony play” is a fetish related to the act of pretending to be a pony.

think it freshly enameled” (152); the same kind of treatment happens with female ponies.

Terms such as “slave” and “master/mistress” are continuously repeated in the narrative and such terms are not considered as a racial issue – actually, they are not considered an issue at all. The novel does not mention any black character, which corresponds to Robin Bauer and Margot Weiss argument that, white BDSM practitioners have the privilege to use terms related to slavery without problematizing or politicizing them. Anne Rice, as a white writer, presents a narrative with white people, and, as the BDSM practitioners interviewed by Weiss, do not see slavery scenes as an issue. As Weiss discussions mentioned in the previous chapter, BDSM scenes can approach polemic topics, even taboos, as slavery or rape, what matters is how such themes are approached. When terms related to slavery are repeated throughout the whole novel without any concern about the usage of such terms, what Rice does it to reinforce the white privilege of approaching a theme that is a racial issue, and dealing with it through a “neutral” perspective, as if slave was not an issue at all. By seeking to rethink BDSM practices, Weiss points out the importance of the political effect that BDSM scenes provoke, in *Beauty’s Kingdom* the narrative presents elements of slavery and, by not discussing it and not politicizing it, the narrative misses the opportunity to have a political effect and remains indifferent to it.

5 FINAL REMARKS

The purpose of this work was to investigate BDSM practices representation in literature – specifically in the novel *Beauty’s Kingdom* – in order to look for representations that go beyond the binary discussion of BDSM as either good or bad, especially in relation to gender studies and feminism. I consider such topic relevant due to the spread of the notion of postfeminism, which became even more popular with the publication of novels such *Fifty Shades of Grey*, erotic literature for a female audience, reproducing gender stereotypes and making use of practices considered to be subversive, such as BDSM, to give a false idea that the narrative is subversive as well, while the main plot is about a naïve/submissive woman being fascinated with a strong/dominant man. With Anne Rice’s publication of *Beauty’s Kingdom*, and the promising statement that the fourth volume would be different from the previous ones, because the erotic slavery would be

voluntary and Beauty – who suffered through the initial narrative as a slave – would become queen, I saw an encouraging narrative that would finally present BDSM practices with the potential it has to subvert gender, class, and race hierarchies. However, such potential was not as present as I had imagined.

My hypothesis was that *Beauty's Kingdom* could present a representation of BDSM practices that went beyond the binary debate, demonstrating a possibility to rethink such practices, especially when considering Beauty's transition from slave to queen, and the kingdom's tradition of obligated erotic slavery to voluntary. Yet, just as *Fifty Shades of Grey* and other erotic novels published after it, *Beauty's Kingdom* was promising, but did not fulfill it. It is possible to notice an attempt to work with gender fluidity, and even to subvert stereotypical gender roles – as Tristan's questioning regarding the statement that men were better dominants than women, and Beauty's acceptance towards the women who wished to live as men – however, the novel is still attached to the reproduction of not only gender, but class hierarchies as well.

Weiss stated that BDSM has become a product, and Rice's narrative reproduces this notion. While what Weiss sees as product are BDSM props and clothes, Rice sells the practitioners themselves. Bellavalten's economy is based on erotic slavery as tourist attraction, to which people from other villages are curious about and pay to witness it. Such factor has a considerable influence on the masters and mistresses' relation towards the slaves. Dmitri indeed demonstrates concern because he is also worried about his slave's pleasure, but the preoccupation demonstrated by the Queen, and even the contracts that stated that no marks would be left in the slaves, or that they would be well fed and taken care of, is not a concern with the slaves' wellbeing as people, but as products; the kingdom needs them alive and strong in order to increase Bellavalten's economy.

The notion of slaves as products is reinforced by the fact that slaves cannot have any lands or titles; even if a slave was previously a lord – such as Lord Stefan – they would have to abdicate everything they had, and depend on the kingdom to have habitation and food. The slave's subjection to their masters and mistresses is related to the class hierarchy present in the novel. Master and mistresses are superior not only because they can punish slaves, but they are also economically superior, since they are the ones who can provide for the slaves.

Inserted in this “post *Fifty Shades* era,” the novel *Beauty’s Kingdom* is an attempt to offer to women who enjoy erotic literature a plot in which sex and sexuality are subversive – what can be noticed through the characters who sexually engage with others regardless of their gender. However, as the analysis showed, the plot is not subversive enough, and many times it relies on gender stereotypes – such as the notion that women are inherently submissive while men are inherently dominant – and class hierarchies, since those who are in power are sexually dominants and also economically superior, which gives them the possibility to control their sexual slaves. The hierarchic representations of the novel demonstrate that the notion of BDSM as a relation with shared power (Scott 89; Call 12) is not present in the plot. Therefore, regarding my second objective of perceiving possible BDSM representations that move beyond the existent debates and thus rethink BDSM practices was not present in the novel. For further research on this topic I suggest a broader analysis of the erotic literature market, focusing on novels written by women.

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