

A World Without Safe Words: Fifty Shades of Russian Grey

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Abstract: Advertised as “The Russian ‘Fifty Shades of Grey,’” the trilogy of romances by the Alisa Klever adapts erotic BDSM to Vladimir Putin’s Russia. Despite an obvious debt to EL James, Klever’s trilogy is a uniquely Russian work that reflects and comments on its social context. Revolving around a damaged yet forceful hero who demands total erotic obedience from the hyper-feminine Arina Krylova, Klever’s trilogy creates a fictional world in which the domination and submission underlying the gender regime in contemporary Russia become explicit. Klever’s books illustrate the prevalence of a distinctly post-feminist eroticism in Putin’s Russia, in which women like the fictional Krylova represent the ideal Russian citizen, since they display those traits deemed most desirable by Putin’s neonational, neoliberal regime. The substantive changes Klever renders to the *Fifty Shades* formula include a sadistic subplot—without any corresponding masochism—that fundamentally alters the significance of BDSM, so that it comes to represent all forms of violence done to the individual in contemporary Russia. Klever’s trilogy not only depicts, but more importantly critiques contemporary Russian gender roles, urging its female readers to expand those spaces where they can form community and exercise autonomy.

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While visiting St. Petersburg in the summer of 2015, I found myself browsing the shelves of Dom Knigi, the city's premiere bookstore located on its grandest avenue, Nevskii Prospect. Rather than confine myself to the sizeable departments devoted to belles-lettres, literary studies, and the history of Russia, I decided to browse a relatively small section labelled "Literature for Ladies" (Damskaia literatura). This was Dom Knigi's collection of popular romance, most of which was translated from English, but some of which came from the pens of Russian authors. Among the books, both new and used, two stood out: *Two Months and Three Days* and *The Four Ends of the Earth* by Alisa Klever. In addition to the covers' steamy black-and-white photographs, the phrase, in bright gold lettering, "Fifty Shades of Grey," immediately caught my eye. On further inspection, I realized that this phrase had nothing to do with the title of either book; instead, it came from a blurb by Russian television personality and sexpert Anfisa Chekhova, who deemed Klever's books "the Russian *Fifty Shades of Grey*." The covers of what I ultimately discovered to be a trilogy, whose third book bears the title *The Fifteenth Paradise*, describe Klever's work as depicting "White-hot passion;" "About passionate, beautiful, forbidden love;" "Exquisite, erotic, [and] truthful about love." All three book covers claim that author "Alisa Klever gives us the real Russian view of love in all of its manifestations" by adapting EL James' popular trilogy of erotic romances for a Russian readership.

As a scholar of Russian literature, I immediately thought of Klever's trilogy in terms borrowed from Vladimir Lukin, an eighteenth-century dramatist who developed the theory and practice of "adaptation to our mores" (sklonenie na nashi nruvy) in loose translations of French drama to the Russian stage from the 1760s (Lukin). The comparison of Klever to Lukin posed several questions: Why would a Russian author adapt a trilogy of erotic romances focusing on bondage, discipline, and sadomasochism as private sexual practices, when politics so admirably and publicly take care of these in post-Soviet Russia? Would Russian women, brought up on a diet of nineteenth-century classics by Alexander Pushkin, Fyodor Dostoevsky, and Lev Tolstoy, have an appetite for a story whose happily-ever-after grows out of a pseries of kinky sex acts? And precisely which Russian mores find expression in Klever's adaptation of EL James's works to Vladimir Putin's Russia?

With these questions in mind, I embarked on more than 2,500 pages of reading, over half by EL James and the rest by Alisa Klever. I discovered that Klever's trilogy, despite an obvious debt to *Fifty Shades of Grey*, is a uniquely Russian product. Klever's heroine, the young Arina Krylova, is considerably less submissive and masochistic than Pushkin's Tatiana Larina in *Eugene Onegin*, Dostoevsky's Nastas'ia Filippovna in *The Idiot*, or the title character of Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*. Even so, Klever's trilogy grapples with shades of ethical grey that harken back to nineteenth-century Russian literature more than to the very black-and-white moral universe of *Fifty Shades*. In addition, Klever's books offer a smorgasbord of non-traditional sex practices, which predictably end in the heroine's deeply satisfying orgasm, to female readers living in a country that has suffered from a so-called "crisis of masculinity" for more than two decades (Borenstein 24-50). The mild bondage, dominance, and submission that characterize the sex in Klever's trilogy create a space where bodies, emotions, consumption, and citizenship all intermesh, allowing the author to demonstrate the beauty of well-regulated intercourse among these four, as well as the ugliness when such intercourse goes awry. Reading Klever's erotic trilogy ultimately bolstered my conviction that women like the fictional Arina Krylova represent the Russian Federation's ideal citizens, since they display the traits deemed most desirable by Putin's neonational, neoliberal

regime: namely, a strong work ethic, dedication to marriage and family, a modest materialism, and a pleasure-providing self-discipline that most Russian men apparently lack. As a result, Klever's fictionalized BDSM signifies differently in Russia than James's in its original Anglo-American context. Whereas *Fifty Shades* uses BDSM to represent and to inspire the desire of individual women, Klever's trilogy takes individual desire as a point of departure for describing and critiquing the gendered and sexualized nature of citizenship in Vladimir Putin's Russia.

The *Fifty Shades* Phenomenon

To understand how Klever's trilogy reworks *Fifty Shades* for a Russian audience, we must briefly consider the *Fifty Shades* phenomenon. Initially written as fan fiction and self-published online, EL James's trilogy of books—*Fifty Shades of Grey*, *Fifty Shades Darker*, and *Fifty Shades Freed*—tell the story of Anastasia Steele, a virginal college senior, in her own words. Anastasia meets billionaire Christian Grey and is irresistibly drawn to his drop-dead good looks and broken soul. After initially agreeing to sign a contract that would make her Christian's sex slave, Anastasia refuses and instead discovers—over many hundreds of pages—the deep emotional wounds at the hands of a crack-whore mother that caused Christian's penchant for kinky sex. By the end of James's trilogy, Anastasia and Christian get married, have two children, and abandon BDSM almost entirely for more tender yet equally orgasmic vanilla sex, and Anastasia finally knows that she has undone the damage of Christian's tragic childhood. This familiar and undeniably simple plot has proven so popular with readers that James (pennname of British author Erika Leonard) has sold the rights to *Fifty Shades* in thirty-seven different countries, as well as more than 125 million books. In addition, she has penned a retelling of *Fifty Shades* from Christian's point of view and seen her trilogy transformed into Hollywood movies. The runaway success of the *Fifty Shades* franchise inspired *Time Magazine* to list James among the hundred most influential people of 2012 and *Publishers Weekly* to name her "Publishing Person of the Year." By 2014, James's company Fifty Shades, Ltd. had raked in more than twenty million pounds, making the author worth a reported thirty-seven million (Doward).

Given that the subgenre of erotic BDSM romance has enjoyed a significant readership since the mid 2000s (Markert 217-227), we must wonder why James's frankly formulaic writing, which has done little to advance the subgenre, has proven so popular. Try as they might, critics have yet to provide a definitive answer to this question despite the remarkable volume of writing about *Fifty Shades*. Among scholars of popular romance, Katherine Morrissey has pointed out that James's trilogy represents a challenge for those studying fan fiction and popular romance due to the way in which it "blurs the lines between fan work and commercial fiction, amateur and professional, as well as the romantic and the erotic" (Morrissey 2). James's conversion of what initially started off as *Twilight* fan fiction into a commercially successful BDSM romance resulted in a "jumble of influences and literary reference points," which prevent *Fifty Shades* from fully satisfying any of the generic labels typically used to describe it (Morrissey 13). If Morrissey locates the hybridity of *Fifty Shades* in its blend of romance and fan fiction, others focus on James's melding of romance with pornography in the trilogy's narrative structure and essentialized gender roles (McAlister;

Hardy). In fact, James's trilogy fails to fulfil even the most basic criterion of the subgenre of BDSM erotic romance as canonized in the novels of Joey W. Hill. As Sarah Frantz shows, BDSM figures in Hill's work not merely as a sexual practice, but as protagonists' "natural, innate" identity, allowing "a return to the safety and comfort of our primeval roots" (Frantz 54). On the contrary, *Fifty Shades* adheres to the paradigm preceding Hill, in which "As a necessary step to deserve their happy ending, characters were routinely obliged to renounce BDSM as an identity, relegating it instead to the level of mere practice, a 'spice' to be added to their otherwise essentially 'vanilla' sexual orientation, at most on an occasional basis" (Frantz 49, italics in original). In other words, James's novels defy the very categorizations into genre and subgenre used to sell them by the millions, forcing us to speculate on the appeal of generic fluidity and polymorphism to the books' mass readership.

Feminists discussing James's trilogy similarly struggle to explain its appeal. Splitting into different camps as either sex-positive or kinkophobic, they often neglect to notice how the novels' contractual BDSM parallels the marriage contract in which Anastasia and Christian eventually end up (Downing). On the one hand, the sex-positive camp disparages *Fifty Shades* for being not merely "pornography [. . .] by a woman, for women," but a pornotopia of capitalist consumption (Vossen 23). On the other hand, the kinkophobes use the term "mummy porn" to critique James for placing "something relatively taboo (BDSM practices and power exchange) [. . .] within a conservative form—the popular romance narrative" and thereby transforming transgression-as-liberation into neoliberal identification (Roiphe; Dymock). In both views, James's books "shore up the status of the couple as the locus of intimacy (both for the readers of the books and for the main characters), and they produce sexuality as something that can be domesticated and bundled into a consumer product" (Musser 129). From this perspective, *Fifty Shades* is little more than a neoliberal prod towards reproductive, heterosexual coupledness that depicts "the remaking of a female subject in accordance with the slavish specifications of contemporary commodity fetishism" (Booth 114), and James's "shoring up of the gender binary functions to reassure the cultural imaginary of the West that its social, political, and economic systems still stand, that they remain the *right* ideology" (Trevenen 16, italics in original). Yet other kinkophobes have pointed out that Christian's domination of Anastasia, not only in the bedroom, but at work, the gym, the beauty salon, the department store, the car dealership, and elsewhere, resembles stalking and domestic abuse more than the consensual practices of the real-life BDSM community (van Reenen).

When we turn from academics to actual readers of *Fifty Shades*, as Ruth Deller and Clarissa Smith did in a 2013 poll, we discover that the overwhelming majority are heterosexual women, that many never got beyond book one or two, and that most picked up *Fifty Shades* "to 'see what the fuss was about'" (Deller & Smith 934). Deller and Smith contend that *Fifty Shades* provides the classic example of "a book you must read but weren't really supposed to like, in fact, the best response was to be superior, to recognize its failures," even though two-thirds of the readers they polled confirmed that the books were a turn-on (Deller & Smith 940, 945). Interestingly, journalists writing about *Fifty Shades* immediately after its publication echo readers' sentiments: in addition to claiming to have only skimmed the books or not to have read *Fifty Shades* at all, many professional reviewers were careful to assert their "immunity from the text [which] was often inextricable from claims of cultural superiority to its readers" (Serisier 118, 124). This posture of condescension appears perhaps most vividly in the "snark fandom" surrounding *Fifty Shades*, which, as Sarah

Harman and Bethan Jones describe, generates “an ironic, even guilty, fandom in which readers and viewers bemoan the series’ flaws, while enjoying (sometimes furtively) the texts” (Harman & Jones 952). In other words, there is no one answer to the question of *Fifty Shades*’ popularity, and James’s success demonstrates the power of “romantic fiction [. . .] as simultaneously an economic, cultural, ideological and pleasurable phenomenon” (Gill & Herdieckerhoff). Most importantly, James’ trilogy allows both those who love it and those who hate it to take pleasure shamelessly, whether from its explicit depiction of “kinky fuckery” or from joining the sizable community of *Fifty Shades* bashers.

As this overview suggests, James’ trilogy represents a Borg in contemporary publishing: as with *Star Trek*’s fictional alien species, resistance to *Fifty Shades* is futile, because the franchise effectively assimilates all genres, all types of criticism, and an astounding variety of readers. James’s publishing Borg has proven so powerful that it has inspired everything from copycat novels to sex toys, creating a consumption boom that reaches far beyond the acts of buying and reading the *Fifty Shades* trilogy (Dymock 887-889; Scott 156-159; Williams). Consequently, the *Fifty Shades* phenomenon provides evidence of the “late-20th-century process by which dominant culture has begun to trade upon ‘transgression’ as cultural capital [and] sexual citizenship has become a profitable basis for the construction of readerships” (Sonnet 177). This process of mainstreaming BDSM leads to the conclusion that, in addition to the safe words used by Christian and Anastasia to establish the boundaries—physical, psychological, and ethical—of their sexual play, “James’s texts consist of literally ‘safe words’: initially unfamiliar ideas made palatable in a discourse that safeguards mainstream beliefs and values” (Downing 100).

Importing *Fifty Shades* into Russia

When we turn from the *Fifty Shades* phenomenon to Alisa Klever’s books, the most obvious difference between the two trilogies is that Klever’s does not represent a publishing Borg assimilating everything in its path. As Emily Johnson’s contribution to this issue of *The Journal of Popular Romance Studies* describes, both the genre of popular romance and the industry that publishes it in post-Soviet Russia differ significantly from their Anglo-American counterparts. The inchoate nature of the genre in the Russian marketplace, which provides authors little copyright protection or profit, prevents those writing romance in Russia from enjoying the bestseller status and financial success of Western authors, such as James, Nora Roberts, or Danielle Steele (Johnson). It should come as no surprise that both the print runs and sales figures for Klever’s trilogy fall far beneath those of *Fifty Shades*. The Eksmo publishing house, which, incidentally, also published the Russian translation of James’s trilogy, produced each of Klever’s three books in print runs of about ten thousand, and all versions of the book—hardback, paperback, and e-book—have sold relatively well. According to Olga Aminova, head of contemporary literature in Eksmo’s Moscow headquarters, Klever’s trilogy sold slightly less than forty-two thousand books as of August 2016, which is a far cry from James’s 125 million (Aminova). Nevertheless, in an email message to me, Klever stated, “for Russia and for a totally unknown author [these sales figures] are considered quite good, but not outstanding” (Klever, email from 5 August 2016).

The differences between the two trilogies do not end with sales. Klever's adaptation to Russian tastes preserves key elements of the *Fifty Shades* brand: the three-part structure, experimentation with BDSM, love between a fabulously wealthy man of the world and a virginal ingénue, and wedded, procreative bliss by the final page. However, Klever has taken liberties with the *Fifty Shades* formula, adding depth to her work. For example, she replaces James's repetitious first-person narrator with a selectively omniscient third-person narrator capable of exploring or eliding the motivations of her heroine and the story's other characters. In addition, Klever cuts the tedious sex contract quoted in its entirety in *Fifty Shades of Grey* (165-175). Instead, we read that Arina has signed "some kind of contract to be employed in the capacity of, ha-ha, a personal assistant for a period of three months with a salary on which Arina could comfortably live for several years [. . .] She signed the contract in a single stroke without reading it" (Book #1, 122). In volume three, Klever also includes a series of playful footnotes that alert readers to those moments when she could have lapsed into the "lyrical" cliché of romance but decided not to (Book #3, 104, 123, 149, 184, 287). This partial list of the formal and stylistic changes by Klever suggests her awareness of the censure typically directed at James's prose, as well as a desire to overcome such writing pitfalls.

When we turn to the main characters of Klever's trilogy, more substantial innovations in the *Fifty Shades* formula come to light. In place of Anastasia Steele, a senior English major who breaks into publishing with the help of her billionaire boyfriend, Klever's heroine Arina Krylova is an aspiring veterinary student, who lives on her own in Moscow, far away from the rural farm where she grew up. As *Two Months and Three Days* begins, Arina diligently studies veterinary science by day and works in an animal clinic by night, barely making ends meet. Her vulnerability and loneliness in comparison to Anastasia Steele prove especially striking once we consider Arina's best friend and roommate, Nellie. Rather than provide expensive clothes, helpful dating advice, or a loving shoulder to cry on, "Nellie never liked Arina. There was something elusive that always infuriated Nellie, that provoked her desire to throw a glass at Arina" (Book #3, 184). As we discover in the course of Klever's trilogy, that elusive something is none other than Arina's moral backbone, which represents a reproach to the mercenary Nellie. In fact, Arina's best friend typically runs her out of the house whenever "boyfriends" show up looking for sex in exchange for gifts and money. In the most grueling depiction of sex in all three books, Nellie has a degrading *ménage-a-trois* with two such "boyfriends." In the process, Nellie realizes that "she is a prostitute. An utter prostitute" (Book #2, 30), and shortly afterwards she betrays Arina to the trilogy's villain, who subsequently tortures and rapes Nellie. Arina's BFF is a far cry from the squeaky-clean Kate Kavanagh of *Fifty Shades*, whose only bad feelings towards Anastasia Steele take the form of briefly envying her billionaire boyfriend. Even though Klever's heroine has the same positive traits as James's—ambition, stick-to-itiveness, virginity, naïve beauty, and a belief in true love—Arina Krylova inhabits a lonelier and more dangerous environment than her *Fifty Shades* counterpart and has no real allies at the start of the Russian trilogy.

If Klever increases her heroine's independence and vulnerability, she correspondingly decreases those of her hero, Maksim Korshunov, in comparison to *Fifty Shades*' Christian Grey. Like Christian, Maksim is a stunningly attractive, unfailingly erect "grey-eyed devil," ever attentive to his girlfriend's feelings, needs, and desires (Book #1, 64). However, Maksim is not a self-made man, but a professional photographer, whose edgy art and kinky lifestyle are financed by his oligarch father, Konstantin Korshunov, who as the

novel's villain places multiple, life-threatening impediments in Maksim and Arina's way. Most of these obstacles arise from trauma inflicted on Maksim during childhood. In addition to hiring a surrogate to produce his heir and thereby depriving Maksim of a mother's love, the elder Korshunov scarred his young son by exposing him to actual sadism. Adding insult to injury, Konstantin Korshunov alienated his son from Russia by sending him to a posh British boarding school, where he all but forgets his native tongue, and virtually imprisoning him once he returns to Moscow:

[Maksim] lived [in Russia] from twelve to eighteen years old, but he spent these years beneath the scrutiny of his father's gaze, escorted to and from a private high school by two body guards. All that he saw in Russia were the malicious, unsmiling faces of servants and the insane things that his father clumsily hid from him and which Maxim preferred not to remember. Women screaming in pain. The loud sounds of music whose rhythm coincided with the sounds of a whip flying up and down (Book #2, 51).

This traumatic childhood deprives Maksim of both love and a homeland, representing a shift in the hero's emotional damage from *Fifty Shades'* crack-addicted mother to a psychopathic father. By making Maksim's father entirely responsible for both the child-abandonment and sadism that James splits between Christian's mother and her pimp, Klever combines a Cinderella story with Beauty and the Beast and introduces nationalistic overtones into the *Fifty Shades* formula. Much as Christian does for Anastasia, Maksim realizes all of Arina's fantasies: he gives her an overseas passport and her first orgasm, takes her virginity, finances her first trip abroad to experience the seductive perversions of the West, furnishes a luxurious apartment in Moscow for her, makes her pregnant, and proposes marriage. However, the way Maksim does all of this, unlike his sexual advances, rubs Arina the wrong way, not only because he abridges her independence, but also because where they end up and what he does feel distinctly un-Russian.

BDSM in the Russian Context

The national coloring of Klever's leading characters has profound implications for the basic plot she borrows from *Fifty Shades*. By bringing an authentically Russian girl from the provinces together with a man of dubious birthright, Klever separates the supposedly natural dominance of Russian men over women from forms of submission unnatural to Russia, as we see in the couple's first sexual encounters. Arina's lack of sophistication and naïveté attract Maksim, encouraging him to imagine that this "real Russian beauty" (Book #1, 242) is in fact a living, breathing Snow White. The fairytale comparison motivates Maksim to arrange a photo shoot in which Arina enacts his BDSM fantasy inspired by the Disney heroine. In an impulse comparable to Nellie's desire "to throw a glass at Arina," Maksim tells her, "You have something elusive, something rare. I'd like to draw you. I'd like to possess you. To screw you" (Book #1, 91). Once Arina agrees, despite her better judgment, Maxim dictates every detail of the photo shoot, demanding her obedience to his every whim as both a man and an artist. In the process, "she became a woman, he made her a woman,"

(Book #1, 161) and Arina discovers how “she truly liked the sensation of his power over her body” (Book #1, 160), since Maksim “holds her in the sweetest captivity of which [she] could only dream” (Book #1, 162). The sex they have teaches Arina the joys of feminine submission, but the photo shoot does exactly the opposite. After costuming Arina as Snow White, Maksim throws her on the floor, covers her with blood, and then places her in a cage, making her the victim of his “somehow strange, crazy, and perverted sense of beauty” (Book #1, 186). As the shoot reaches its climax, Arina realizes that she has been forced to represent “annihilated innocence” (Book #1, 181) and that the objectification of Maksim’s camera lens, unlike his sexual objectification, has reduced her to “a thing” (Book #1, 183). Maksim’s masculine dominance reads as natural and highly arousing in the bedroom. However, the same dominance appears perverse and dampens desire in the artistic setting of the photo shoot, which places the Russian Arina inside a Hollywood interpretation of a German fairytale that Maksim has recreated beyond the borders of Russia in Berlin.

In the wake of the photo shoot, Arina submits fully to Maksim’s lust, yet she refuses any further victimization to his dark artistic vision and traumatic past. When he tries to draw her deeper into the subculture of sexual dominance and submission by taking Arina to an exclusive British sex club, she recoils at the sight of a woman being auctioned as a slave and recognizes the narcotic potential of the sexual pleasure offered by BDSM (Book #1, 298). At the end of the first book in Klever’s trilogy, this revelation drives Arina to flee “Maksim Korshunov, son of an oligarch, photographer, the most handsome and most monstrous man in the world, who wants to own her like a thing” (Book #1, 305). Arina refuses the visible pleasure of the highly theatrical slave auction she witnesses. Instead, she opts for true love and self-determination, asserting, “I’m a free person with a free will” (Book #2, 110).

Much as Anastasia Steele does with Christian Grey, Arina ultimately tames “the inhuman cruelty of the Korshunovs” in the second book of Klever’s trilogy (Book #2, 116). By rejecting Maksim’s desire to dominate her and giving him the healing love he needs, Arina effectively repatriates him to Russia, which “had never been home for Maksim” (Book #3, 296). If he makes Arina “feel like a real woman,” then she remedies his predicament of being “Russian by blood [but] a foreigner due to his alien essence,” transforming Maksim into a real Russian man (Book #2, 205, 49). This ability to affect her lover’s homecoming suggests that the provincial Arina possesses an authentically Russian soul, which Maksim, a pampered child of ill-gotten wealth, must repeatedly penetrate and impregnate to make his own.

The sometimes humorous clashes between the hero and heroine’s backgrounds support this interpretation of their evolving relationship. In one particularly comical scene, Maksim pursues Arina, who takes refuge at her parents’ farm in the Russian countryside after the shocking slave auction. Convinced he cannot live without her, Maksim races towards Arina in his red Porsche Turbo, but his quest is slowed by a Moscow traffic jam and then grinds to a halt when he finds himself outside GPS range and stuck in a muddy, rural field. The Russian provinces unman Maksim’s German-made sports car, and their victory is attenuated only when Maksim finds Arina, brings her to multiple orgasm in her parents’ barn, and then watches her help a mare give birth to a baby foal. In correspondence with me, Klever noted the serious message underlying this episode’s humor: “for Russia, Moscow is a separate universe cut off from the rest of the country in many different ways [. . .] The issue of ‘the total rupture’ between the elite and the real Russia is very widespread here among us” (Klever, email from 29 July 2016). As Klever’s comment suggests, we can view the repatriation of the elite Muscovite Maksim through sex with Arina, an authentically Russian

woman from the provinces, as a symbolic bridging of the geographic and socio-economic gap separating Russia's capital city from the countryside.

Russian Romance Meets Nordic Noir

The patriotic undercurrent in Arina and Maksim's romance contributes to the dramatic difference in how and what BDSM signifies in Klever's trilogy when compared to *Fifty Shades*. Whereas James circumscribes her trilogy's "kinky fuckery" within a limited circle of bondage, spanking, and sex toys, Klever expands these by including a murder-mystery subplot that revolves around the genuinely sadistic Konstantin Korshunov. Rather than placing the psychopathic villain on the story's periphery as James does, Klever makes Maksim's father, whose cruel treatment of his son is matched by death-dealing sex practices, central to the drama around the two lovers. The nightmares that haunt Maksim from the very start of the trilogy represent traumatic memories of his father murdering a partner, whose refusal of a safe word and lack of "hard limits" in a BDSM scene lead to her strangulation. In addition, these nightmares provide Arina with sufficient evidence to piece together the mystery of this woman's death, making Klever's subplot resemble Nordic noir detective fiction. The elder Korshunov's desire for control threatens the lives of all who come into contact with him, including Maksim, Arina, their unborn child, Arina's parents, and, most directly, Nellie. However, solving the mystery behind Maksim's nightmares allows Arina to draw a crucial distinction between her lover and his father: "If sadism for some is an impassioned, heady game, forbidden and enticing, but harmless and requiring mutual consent, then for [Konstantin] Korshunov, the entire point of the game was in making everything real" (Book #3, 256). Once she comes to this realization, Arina not only cures Maksim of his childhood trauma, but also weans him of his more extreme BDSM practices in favor of gentler forms of sex.

The incorporation of a Nordic noir subplot represents Klever's most substantive innovation in the *Fifty Shades* formula. As uncharacteristic as this element may seem, it brings to mind another instance of Russian popular culture, Aleksei Balabanov's 2007 film *Cargo 200* (Gruz 200). A bleak farce, *Cargo 200* is set in the late 1980s and depicts the emergence of Russian entrepreneurs, who morphed from New Russians into oligarchs by the end of the 1990s, out of cynicism, alcoholism, sadism, and rape. Among Balabanov's cast of gruesome characters is a psychopathic policeman, who kidnaps and rapes a teenage girl and then deposits her boyfriend's corpse—shipped back from the Soviet conflict in Afghanistan in a zinc casket code-named "Cargo 200"—onto the bed to which the captive girl is chained. Balabanov's film represents a scathing critique of the last Soviet generation, whose hopes for prosperity quickly gave way to self-interest, greed, and cruelty, positing sadism as the foundation of post-Soviet prosperity. Although Klever makes no explicit reference to the film, she picks up where Balabanov leaves off in her depiction of Konstantin Korshunov, a worthy companion for *Cargo 200*'s policeman psychopath. True to the genre of romance, however, Klever's story argues that the intergenerational trauma on which Balabanov bases his story can in fact be healed. Although Maksim seems likely to perpetuate his father's barbarous legacy in the first book of Klever's trilogy, the healing love offered by Arina in the second book, as well as her successful sleuthing in the third book, brings the cycle of sadism to an

end. The link between *Cargo 200* and Klever's books suggests that her version of BDSM is not limited to *Fifty Shades'* neoliberal transgression-as-liberation; instead, it represents the larger historical and social violence done to the individual in contemporary Russia. As Maksim asks himself, "Who needs handcuffs in the bedroom when the whole world fucks you 24/7 anyway?" (Book #2, 52)

This innovation in the *Fifty Shades* formula means that Arina and Maksim's BDSM repeatedly threatens to leave the sphere of safety for pain, addiction, and death, as was the case for the elder Korshunov and his murdered lover. To guarantee safety, Arina and Maksim try to separate their private BDSM from the larger social violence taking place in Russia's public sphere by domesticating their kinkier sex practices, as a scene from Klever's second book demonstrates. Maksim ties Arina up in the kitchen of their luxury condo as a prelude to sex, and he asks her whether she wants a safe word. She responds, "I don't need any kind of safe-word," and Maksim then binds Arina's wrists with the ribbons holding the kitchen curtains, cuts her clothing off with kitchen shears, and covers her eyes with a dishtowel (Book #2, 198). After some six pages of arousal, Arina finally loses control and in the moment of orgasm,

Arina cried out, and laughed, and writhed, restrained by the red ribbons, but in that very moment, she felt herself inexplicably free. As if the cage, in which she had sat her whole life suddenly fell to bits, allowing her to inhale with her whole chest. Lying in the arms of her powerful, strong man, Arina felt like a real woman. And it was wonderful (Book #2, 205).

Without Christian Grey's "red room of pain," Maksim and Arina use kitchen implements for their "kinky fuckery," finding eroticism in domesticity and freedom in constraint. Although Arina ran from the actual cage in which Maksim placed her for the photo shoot of Snow White, she discovers that submission during sex to "her powerful, strong man" frees her from the traumas of her own past, including her impoverished childhood in the countryside and alcoholic father, which have held her in a psychic cage. In addition, her refusal of a safe word transforms Maksim and Arina's domesticated "kinky fuckery" into a form of edgeplay, whose blurring of hard limits of all types ultimately mirrors the lack of physical, psychological, and ethical boundaries in the Russian reality they seek to escape. After this scene, the phrase "no safe words" becomes the couple's loving refrain, and the trilogy ends with their sex life taking a final leap from BDSM, through the domestic, and into the virtual, when Maksim asks Arina to name her pleasure using a virtual reality headset as they fly off into the sunset in a private jet (Book #3, 339).

From Authorial Intent to Reader Response

In the end, Klever leaves the tension between this flight into virtual reality and a world without safe words unresolved, allowing her trilogy to retain an ethical uncertainty absent from *Fifty Shades*. In correspondence with me, Klever described her dissatisfaction with the character of Christian Grey as well as what she believes to be James's overly optimistic view of BDSM. Rather than depict bondage and dominance as mere fun and games, Klever "wanted to draw a line between what we call 'kinky sex' and forms of sexual addiction,

similar to narcotics, in which sex leads not to happiness, but to mental abuse, physical injury, and even death” (Klever, email from 29 July 2016). Her interest in pathological BDSM led Klever to introduce the dark subplot swirling around Maksim’s father, and she admits that embracing a broader range of BDSM than James allowed her “to join the unjoinable, to show the plusses of sexual freedom and emancipation, as well as the monstrous minuses of BDSM as a narcotic that can lead to definite, often irreparable consequences” (Klever, email from 29 July 2016). As a result, Klever’s readers reach a double-edged conclusion at her trilogy’s end. On the one hand, they learn that “in happiness and in love there aren’t and can’t be any ‘norms.’ Behind bedroom doors, all options are permissible as long as they make people happy” (Klever, email from 29 July 2016). Arina echoes this sentiment in the trilogy’s third book: “*As long as the two of us are here together in the twilight of our bedroom, who’ll dare to judge us for what we do with our bodies?*” (Book #3, 50, italics in original) On the other hand, the fictional world Arina and Maksim inhabit is modelled on Russian “society [which] imposes so called traditional values rather harshly, not only in one’s sex life, but in all other respects [. . .] A conservative approach—that’s Russia” (Klever, email from 29 July 2016). At the same time that Klever’s trilogy carves out space for Arina and Maksim’s sexual autonomy, it depicts that space as highly circumscribed, largely protected by their exceptional wealth, and rapidly receding from the reality of Moscow’s streets into a virtual world constructed on board Maksim’s private jet.

Given Russia’s increasingly conservative social climate, publishing an erotic trilogy that blends Cinderella with Beauty and the Beast required bravery on Klever’s part. Already an established author of women’s fiction (“Alisa Klever”), she opted for a pseudonym that combines Lewis Carroll’s *Alice in Wonderland* with a play on the English words “clever” and “clover” (“shamrock” in Russian), to insulate herself from any backlash occasioned by publishing erotica, a genre that has, oddly enough, yet to fall prey to censorship in Putin’s Russia. However, with the release in 2018 of an English translation of the trilogy’s first book as *Two Months and Three Days (Sinister Romance Book 1)* on Kindle, Klever shed her pseudonym and revealed her identity as Tatiana Vedenska, author of more than forty popular Russian romance novels (Vedenska). Throughout her correspondence with me, Klever stressed her desire to use the *Fifty Shades* formula to encourage her mostly female readers’ tolerance for the non-traditional, their empathy for her heroine, and their ability to articulate their own desires and needs. Her greatest hope is that those reading her trilogy “feel more than think. First and foremost, [her] books should become sensual entertainment” that arouses the reader (Klever, email from 29 July 2016).

In the opinion of some, this is precisely what Klever’s books do. About half of the reader reviews I found online evaluated them positively. Some of Klever’s fans praised the books’ “rich language and substantive dialogs,” which in their opinion demonstrated her superiority to James (Liabova (@shade); Nikishina). Others appreciated the Russianness of Klever’s adaptation:

Here’s an important moment: [the heroes] are Russian. Yes, they’re Russian lovers. There aren’t any Jessicas or Anastasias. There isn’t a George or an Edward. Everything’s as it should be: Arina and Maks. It’s a pity, it would have been more interesting if he were named Ivan and she, Mar’ia. . . (Nikishina).

However, more frequent than admiration for good writing or incorporating national color were reader comments that I interpret as confirmation of the books' capacity to arouse. For example, "It was beautiful and gripping," "The book grips you from the first page, it's easy to read in a single breath," "Space is left for the reader's fantasy," or "The book excites, it's like an electric thrill!" (Liabova (@shade); najle; AnastasiyaScherbina; antonina) Evidently, a significant portion of those readers who chose to write online reviews found the "sensual entertainment" that the author hoped they would.

Yet for every positive review of Klever's trilogy, I found a negative one faulting the author for precisely what her fans appreciated. In addition to attacking Klever's prose, some anti-fans claimed that she plagiarized *Fifty Shades*, much as Dmitrii Emets intentionally copied J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* in his series of young adult fantasy novels starring Tania Grotter in the early 2000s (nastasia505). These critics complained that the phrase "Fifty Shades of Grey" on the books' covers in large gold letters represents little more than a cheap marketing ploy. Yet others panned the genre of erotic BDSM romance as "something cheap," "garbage," "a nightmare," "raving," or "a tragedy" (nastasia505; moorigan; lenysjatko; inna2792; theroute16). Needless to say, such critics found nothing in or about the books a turn-on, as one particularly snarky reviewer made clear: "All of this modern fucking-around with a focus on psychiatry looks so impoverished that it smacks of literary impotence" (hoh_ma).

Conclusion

Klever's adaptation of *Fifty Shades of Grey* to a Russian readership indeed resembles James' work in many ways, but it is neither literary impotence nor plagiarism. Unlike Emets's *Tania Grotter* books, which a Dutch court deemed an infringement of Rowlings's copyright (Dawtre), Klever lifts only the most general features from James's books, as many other BDSM romances following in James's wake do. By altering the *Fifty Shades* formula to suit Russian mores, Klever introduces substantive innovations in the style, characters, and plot of her trilogy, which allow the Russian women reading her story to satisfy their desire not only to be turned on, but also to read about truly Russian characters whose unfolding love comments on their country's recent past. In fact, the sharply divided reviews quoted above suggest that one of the strongest links between Klever's and James's trilogies is the capacity to provide different readers with shameless pleasure, whether through "kinky fuckery" or fostering a community of Arina-and-Maksim or Anastasia-and-Christian haters.

Nonetheless, Klever's books have come nowhere close to James's publishing Borg, despite the popularity of romance among Russian readers. A 2014 survey determined that romance is the most popular literary genre among Russians with 13 percent of respondents stating their preference for "novels about love" or "women's novels" ("Chto chitaem?"). The same Russian tastes and mores, not to mention the literary marketplace to which Klever adapted *Fifty Shades*, have prevented her from replicating James' runaway success, and Klever's trilogy functions differently than its prototype due to this different commercial and cultural context. Most importantly, Klever's heroine Arina Krylova represents the post-feminist ideal of Russian citizenship that has gained traction during the Putin era, and we can easily read Klever's trilogy as a thinly-veiled allegory of the masculine domination and

feminine submission that currently characterize Russian culture and politics. Although Arina preserves her personal independence and free will, the most obvious lesson she learns is that “To be subject to [and] spread beneath the strong, powerful body of a man—is a feeling, that happens so rarely, that you yearn for, and that you want to experience again and again” (Book #3, 328). It takes little imagination to read this statement about Arina’s desire for Maksim as a broader description of the Russian populace’s enthrallment with Vladimir Putin, whose approval ratings have typically hovered around 80 percent in recent years (Ray & Esipova). Women like Arina appear not only to model loving submission to Russia’s hypermasculine leader, but also to offer a solution to the country’s “crisis of masculinity” by repatriating a generation of men, who, like Maksim, have lost their Russian roots.

Limiting ourselves to an allegorical interpretation of the Russian *Fifty Shades* would echo kinkophobes’ critique of James’ original and prevent us from appreciating the ultimate impact of Klever’s call to tolerance, empathy, and arousal. Although Arina submits to Maksim’s every sexual caprice in the trilogy’s first book, her independence and free will not only tame but also humanize Maksim by the trilogy’s end. In other words, Arina discovers that the feminine submission supposedly “natural” to Russian women has its own “hard limits,” which provide pleasure, knowledge, and even power in relationship to a dominant male and which she can control even without the use of a safe word. Once we recognize the centrality of such feminine power, expressed through women’s words, emotions, bodies, and orgasms in the Russian *Fifty Shades*, we see that Klever’s trilogy pushes hypermasculine oligarchs, their sons, and even Vladimir Putin into the background, so that Russian women can expand the spaces for exercising power and autonomy, as well as forming community. In fact, Alisa Klever has continued to write erotic romances, publishing a new series with Eksmo categorized as “18+,” since I first stumbled on her books in Petersburg’s Dom Knigi. Apparently, the proliferation of the type of erotic romance Klever created while adapting *Fifty Shades* provides both a refuge and an inspiration for a growing number of Russia’s female readers living in a world without safe words.

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